she’s cheer captain and i’m on the bleachers

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she’s cheer captain and i’m on the bleachers

by reminiscingromance

Summary

The last person he expects to see when he walks into detention is Gale-fucking-Cleven.

It’s not that he doesn’t like the guy; it’s just that he finds how perfect he is to be incredibly annoying. Him and his cheerleader girlfriend both look liked they walked right out of a literal magazine. And the fact that he’s the student body president, captain of the football team, and has been Homecoming King for the last two years was just doing too much in John’s opinion. Not to mention that blinding movie-star smile, with those two rows of flawless white teeth John swears he’s seen literally twinkle and a fan club to match those Hollywood-worthy good looks.

Well… now that he thinks about it, you could probably say he doesn’t like the guy.

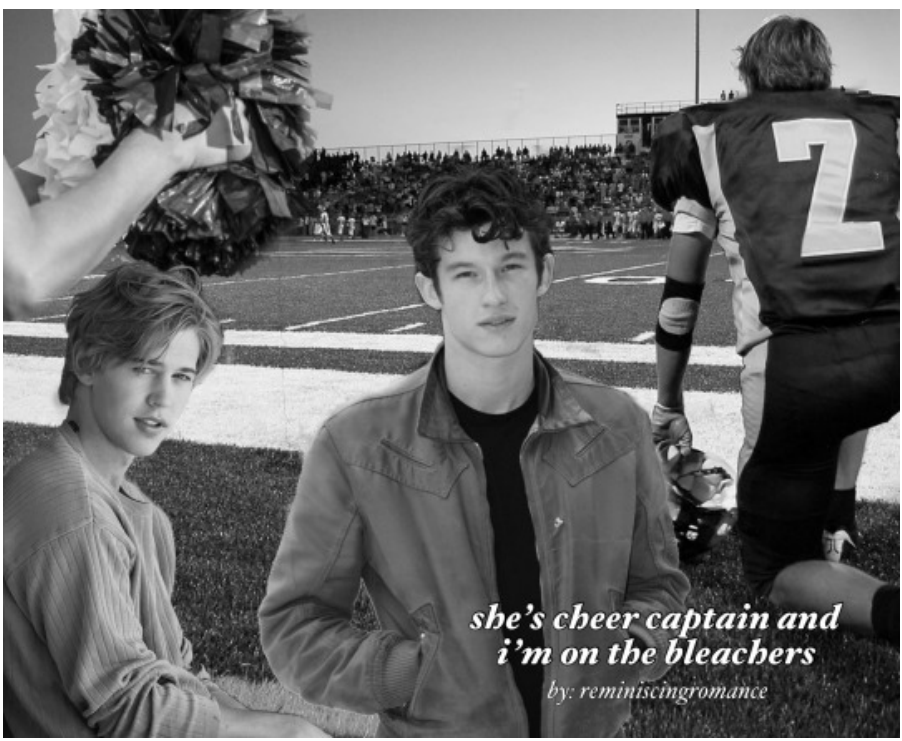
Chapter 1: enchanted

Chapter Notes

Title is hopefully obviously from Taylor Swift's "You Belong With Me." As will all the future chapter names be :)

Disclaimer:
This in no way should reflect or take away from the true feelings or character of the real-life men these two were based on. This is a fictional take!

See the end of the chapter for more notes



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your eyes whispered, "have we met?"

-

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It's not that he doesn't like the guy; it's just that he finds how perfect he is to be incredibly annoying. Him and his cheerleader girlfriend both look like they walked right out of a literal magazine. And the fact that he's the student body president, captain of the football team, and has been Homecoming King for the last two years was just doing too much in John's opinion. Not to mention that blinding movie-star smile, with those two rows of flawless white teeth John swears he's seen literally twinkle and a fan club to match those Hollywood-worthy good looks.

Well… now that he thinks about it, you could probably say he doesn't like the guy.

However, much to his dismay, there's nobody else in the room today. And John, always vibrating with too much energy, can't stand the thought of two hours spent in utter boredom. He wanted someone to play with, so Gale Cleven would have to do.

He plants himself in the desk right behind Gale despite there being at least thirty other options. Gale doesn't react to this, much to John's disappointment. He clears his throat obnoxiously. Gale still doesn't turn around.

He drums his fingers across the wood of his desk and tries to think of something to say. Ultimately, he decides to go with the first thought he'd had upon seeing the quarterback here.

“So how did King Cleven end up in a place like this?” He asks, and the *King* part just slips out. But it felt right, so he goes with it.

He sees the blond pause in turning the page of the book he’d been reading at the mocking nickname, but he doesn’t turn around. “Does it matter?” He responds coolly.

John shrugs even though Gale can’t see it. “Not if you don’t want it to,” he tells the boy. He didn’t really care that much, anyways. “By the way, my name is J-“

“I know yuh’ name,” Gale says, interrupting him with a hint of that southern drawl of his that drives all the girls at the school crazy. He turns around to face him this time and, *oh.*

John gets it now.

He’d seen the sixteen-year-old from afar, like across the hall or from his seat in the audience of school assemblies as the blond made some long and boring speech on stage, but never really up close and personal; the two didn’t really frequent the same areas. The closest they came to interacting was when John actually showed up to the English class they had together, which was rarely.

But none of that is the point. Point is that the dude- the dude is literally *breathtaking.* Like, Ryan Gosling or Channing Tatum level of breathtaking.

His skin is perfectly tanned and sun-kissed, eyes bluer than the sky itself, and his hair falls effortlessly in place.

The guy looks *fucking photoshopped*, Jesus Christ.

He schools the starstruck expression off of his face, because the last thing Gale Cleven needs is another person telling him how attractive he is. He can only imagine how big of an ego the kid must have.

“Course you do,” he replies with a smirk.

Gale rolls his eyes and turns away from him to go back to his book.

John studies the back of his head. If he’s being honest, he was surprised that Gale knew his name. He didn’t really think he registered on the guys radar with how popular he was.

The two sit in silence for a minute. The teacher still hasn’t come.

“You know,” John starts, having zero idea where he’s going with the conversation; the loud boy just could not stand how quiet it was in here. “You look… you look like a guy I knew back home in Wisconsin.”

Gale cocks his head slightly to the side in acknowledgment but his eyes don’t stray from his book. “Is that so,” he asks.

“Yeah, his name was… Buck, I think.”

John has literally never met anybody named Buck in his entire life.

“Yup, you *definitely* look like Buck from Wisconsin.”

“How fascinating,” Gale says flatly.

John grins at the younger boy’s sarcastic tone. Oh this is gonna be *fun.*

He opens his mouth to say some more nonsense, but unfortunately Mr. Huglin finally makes his entrance and the first thing he does is zero in his eyes on John. Or *Colonel,* as John liked to call him, because the guy was high-strung as fuck and one of the biggest assholes he’d ever met.

“Egan, I swear on my entire career, if I have to tell you to be quiet more than *once* today I will make sure you are here after school every day for the next *month.”*

“You can just say you miss me when I’m not here, it’s okay. I won’t tell anybody.”

“Egan.”

John brings a flat hand up to his forehead and gives the teacher a cheeky salute.

There’s a smile pulling at Gale Cleven’s lips that he catches out of the corner of his eye, despite the blond trying to conceal it from him.

It feels like winning a trophy.

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It's only thirty minutes into the two hour detention ahead of them and John is already restless. His leg jiggles up and down under the table, 100% aware that it's jostling his jail partners desk in front of him. Gale shoots him a warning look over his shoulder.

"*Would you quit it?*" He says so quietly that he's basically just mouthing the words.

John gives him a thumbs up and nods in the most serious way he can.

The second Gale turns around, he starts up with it again. There's a loud scraping sound as Gale pointedly moves his desk forward out of frustration.

He laughs at this and puts his hands behind his head in a relaxed demeanor. Staring up at the ceiling, he leans back in his chair so the front legs aren't touching the floor anymore.

When he turns his head, he sees that the clock on the wall says it's 3:30. Thank *fuck*.

He lets his chair fall back to the ground and it makes a satisfyingly loud sound that makes the tips of Gale's ears go red.

When he leans forward, he sees that he's gripping his book tightly with white knuckles. "Any minute now," he tells his very, very irritated classmate.

"Any minute now until *what?"* Gale asks exasperatedly. As soon as he finishes, a loud snore rings out through the room.

John whistles happily. "Right on cue!"

Gale looks at Mr. Huglin who is now slumped over his desk incredulously. "Is he- is he *sleepin'?"*

"Happens every time like clockwork, baby," John tells him as he gets up from his chair. He looks down at Gale expectantly. "So you ready to get out of here or what?"

Gale looks at him like he's from another planet. "There's still over an hour left!"

John just stares at him. "So?"

"*So?"* Gale all but sputters. "We'll- we'll get in trouble!"

"We're already in trouble," John points out.

"We'll get in *more* trouble."

John shrugs at this. Whether Gale came or not, there was no way he

was sitting here for even another minute more than he had to. “Suit yourself, pretty boy.”

He saunters up to the Colonel’s desk in a way where it’s obvious he’s done this before and starts rummaging through the drawers. Gale is watching him with wide, disbelieving eyes.

“He’s gonna wake up,” the boy hisses at him through gritted teeth. John can tell he’s stressing the poor kid out.

“Relax,” John tells him. “He’s not gonna wake up. See?”

He picks up the heaviest textbook on the desk he can find and lets it drop to make his point. Gale jumps at the noise it makes, but good ol’ Huglin doesn’t stir.

“Jesus,” Gale mutters because, well, that wasn’t normal.

As he continues going through the passed out man’s desk, he hums in agreement at the blond’s remark. He digs out a bottle of unlabeled pills from the desk, brandishing it so that Gale can see. “I’m pretty sure it’s a combination of these, and…” John trails off as he tries to locate the man’s Stanley.

He lets out a triumphant little *ah-hah* when he locates it and picks it up.

“A combination of the vodka that’s always in his water bottle,” he says, making sure to use air quotes where it feels appropriate.

Gale looks absolutely horrified. The look of concern only intensifies when John shakes a little white pill out of the container and chases it down with Huglin's 'water.'

"Let's hope it's something good this time," he says, coughing at the bitter aftertaste of the most-likely cheap alcohol.

He then reaches into their teachers pocket and fishes out the man's keys. They jingle as he tosses them up and down in his hand, raising an eyebrow at Gale. "Last chance."

Gale looks like he might have an aneurism. "Do you even have a *license*?"

"No." John definitely has a license.

He just also knows that Gale has a license.

"You really shouldn't drive," the man in question says warily, like witnessing John's reckless actions in the past five minutes had just aged him thirty years.

"Probs not," John concedes, but he starts to make his way to the window regardless. He slides it open with ease, one leg hanging out when he hears Gale Cleven swear and push himself up out from his desk.

"I'll drive."

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Chapter End Notes

I’m back already with a fic idea that’s been on my mind since like, the middle of the season and I finally caved lol.

I have so many ideas for them swirling in my head and stuff drafted that I need to get out of my system!

As always, let me guys know what you think! I loved all your comments on my last fic of them they meant sm < 3 they were a big reason I updated as much as I did!

loved interacting with you guys and didn’t wanna let you down and hope you enjoy this one just as much :)

Chapter 2: wildest dreams

Chapter Notes

Tommy makes an appearance here! How John interacted with his character in the show was so cute < 3

Also Huglin, if you guys didn't catch, was the guy who didn't like John and wouldn't let him fly in the tv show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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he's so tall and handsome as hell
he's so bad, but he does it so well
i can see the end as it begins

-

John feels like how unceremoniously and clumsily Cleven comes tumbling out of the classroom window is pretty embarrassing for an athlete.

That's probably partially due to the fact John hadn't warned him about the really big prickly bush, though.

When Gale hears John laughing at him, he glares up at him from where he'd ended up splayed on the ground after fighting his way out of the shrubbery. "I *will* go back inside and wake Huglin up."

John snorts at this. “You could *try.*”

When John then extends a hand out to help Gale up, Gale eyes the offering suspiciously. He doesn’t take it, but whatever, John couldn’t care less if Gale Cleven took his hand or not.

Or, well, he pretty convincingly tells himself that.

“So wanna tell me *why* we can’t just take my car?” Gale asks as he picks himself up and dusts the dirt off of his letterman jacket. He fights the urge to roll his eyes at this- heaven *forbid* that gets dirty.

“Because that wouldn’t be any fun,” John tells him simply, starting to lead the both of them through the parking lot after the remark like there couldn’t possibly be any better reason in the world to take your teacher’s car for a joy ride.

“You must really enjoy gettin’ detention.”

“Me and Huglin are in love, if you hadn’t noticed.”

This gets a small laugh out of Gale. They arrive at Huglin’s car and he sees Gale put together the pieces is his head on why John would rather take Huglin’s car than his; or anyone’s at the school, quite frankly.

Because the Colonel has a fucking sports car.

“On a *teacher’s salary?*” Gale says, dumbfounded.

John grins at this because, yeah, that shit really doesn't make any sense. "He probably sells those pills in his desk on the side," he guesses as he goes to open the driver's side door.

"Hey, hey, *I'm* drivin' you don't even have a-" John cuts him off by flashing his driver's license in the blond's face. Gale's mouth shuts and his eyebrows scrunch together. "Why'd you say you don't got one then?"

He gives Gale a shrug. "I wanted you to come."

"Oh." John can tell that Gale's not sure what to say back to that. Which is fine, because John's not sure why he even said it. "Well, you still took that pill-"

"Do you like hot dogs?" John asks, stopping Gale mid-sentence.

Gale blinks at him with his wide, innocent blue eyes. "Yeah, I like hot dogs."

"I know the *best* hot dog place this side of town," he informs the blond with a dramatized amount of enthusiasm. "And it's just down the road. So if I start feeling loopy, I'll tell ya. But Huglin's pills are usually shit- so I wouldn't worry your pretty little head about it."

Gale still looks unconvinced with his lips pressed into a thin line. *God,* John thinks, would it kill the guy to not be so morally sound and *safe* for two seconds? John is *fine* to drive. He knows his limits.

“Plus, this way if we get caught you can tell Huglin that I kidnapped you and forced you into it.”

The other man perks up at this. John can see his resolve crumbling, so he takes the opportunity to slide into the leather seats of the luxury vehicle. Gale slips into the passenger side next to him, drags a hand down his face, and stares at the dashboard of the car. John can literally *see* the wheels turning in his head.

“So this is definitely a crime, huh? Marge is gonna murder me.”

“It’s a felony, actually,” John replies casually as he flips the sunglasses he’d found hanging on the car’s mirror down over his eyes. Gale whips around to face him, but John puts the key in the ignition and takes off before Gale can stop him with any protests.

-

John said he knew the *best* place to get hot dogs, not the *fanciest.*

He tells Gale this much when the blond raises his eyebrows at him as they pull up to a small food truck parked outside a baseball stadium. They hop out of the car and the man inside the truck greets them with a smile that goes ear to ear.

“You stayin’ outta trouble, Tommy?” John asks, waltzing up and drumming his hands on the steel of the counter to build anticipation.

“Staying *in* trouble, John,” the bubbly man replies.

“I bet,” John says fondly, turning around to introduce Gale who was still standing a little bit behind him. “This is my…” John doesn’t want to say *friend* because the two are honestly barely even acquaintances, right? “This is Buck. Buck, this is Tommy.”

Gale shoots him an annoyed look. “My name is *Gale.* Gale Cleven.”

John waves him off, bulldozing through the conversation like he hadn’t said anything. “Buck here, well,” he claps a hand down on the shoulder of the younger man for emphasis. He sees Gale’s face twist in displeasure at this. “He wanted a hot dog and I told him I knew the absolute best place to get one.”

Tommy’s entire face lights up at the compliment. “Of course, John, of course!”

John and Gale step away from the window while Tommy starts rummaging around the truck to prepare their food. Plucking a toothpick from the condiment table and placing it between his teeth, John goes and leans leisurely against the exterior.

Gale hovers, hands in his pockets awkwardly, looking like he feels incredibly out of his element. Which he is, in his defense. For one, John muses to himself, he’d just bailed on detention, and two, he’d bailed with he himself: *John Egan.* If Gale had known his name without him having to tell him, he definitely was aware of his reputation.

Yet, for some reason, he still had agreed to come with him on this escapade.

Was he coerced a little? Definitely, John never played fair and he knew how to pull people's strings and play to their weaknesses. But still, the two-year-running homecoming king without a doubt could've just let John walk out the door (or, well, window), and paid no mind- but he hadn't.

And that had to count for something, right?

John just didn't know for what, or why he kind of wanted it to.

He's pulled out of his thoughts by Gale giving him his tinfoil wrapped hot dog. He takes it, but pauses when he catches a glimpse at the back of the hand that had held the hotdog out to him.

He pauses because that hand is *fucked.* Like black and blue, barely healed over split knuckles, 100%-gonna-leave-a-scar kind of fucked. He's mind blown that he somehow hadn't noticed it before.

"Christ, did you try punching through a brick wall?"

Gale snatches his hand back, putting it behind him and out of sight. He suddenly looks oddly nervous.

"No, I… tried to punch through Chick, actually."

Now *that* sends John's head rolling, not that it's surprising someone would punch Chick, because his name rhymes with Dick for a reason if you ask John, but because Chick was one of Gale's teammates. And he'd always been under the impression that the football team was like

a cult or something, and that Gale was their devoted leader.

He's about to push for more information, ask if that's why the boy ended up in detention, but the way Gale's avoiding his eyes tells him not to. And for one of the very few times in his life, John decides to keep his mouth shut.

"Knowing that waste of oxygen, he probably deserved it."

Gale gives him a small but grateful smile. John doesn't like what it does to his chest, so he pushes off from his relaxed position against the wall with his usual flourish. He blows a kiss to Tommy, thanking the elated boy, then nods for Gale to follow him.

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"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's *breaking and entering,* John."

He huffs at this. "Don't be dramatic, we aren't *breaking* anything. We're just hopping over this fence."

"Yeah, the fence with the big red sign that says '*do not enter!*'"

“If a sign said ‘please jump off this cliff’ would you do *that*, too, huh?”

“Well, no, but-“

“Buck, you are going over this fence with me.”

And one way or another Gale eventually, and very begrudgingly, goes over the locked fence of the baseball stadium that Tommy’s hot dog stand had been outside of with John.

-

It had been about 30 minutes since he took one of those little white pills of Huglin's when he was pleasantly surprised to start to feel some effects. He felt warm, relaxed, and like everything was slightly out of touch in *just* the right way.

He sprawls himself across the metal bleachers he’d had the two of them climb, feeling Gale’s eyes following him as he does so. The action causes his black t-shirt to rise up at his waist, and he runs a hand over the skin there for a split second, reveling in the momentary bliss his body is buzzing with.

It might be in his head, but he’s pretty sure Gale’s eyes follow that last action, too.

“Hot dogs just taste *so much better* in a baseball stadium, don’t you think, Buck?” He asks as he starts to unwrap his.

Gale doesn’t start to open his right away; instead burning a hole into the side of John’s head as the brunet starts to dig into his. He’s sure without looking that the blond’s feathers are ruffled at how he’d just confessed his reasoning for jumping the gate had only been for *atmospheric* purposes, on top of John referring to him as ‘Buck’ again.

Eventually, he can hear the crinkle of Gale’s wrapper. “Neva’ been to a baseball game. I wouldn’t know.”

John’s head turns so fast it could’ve snapped off. “You’ve *never been* to a baseball game?”

Gale pauses with his food halfway raised to his mouth, surely startled at how quick John had whipped around to look at him. “Um- yeah, no. Well, a few times as a kid. Don’t much remember that though. Or try not to, anyways.”

Mind stuck on *baseball*, the last part goes over John’s head. He shakes his mop of curls sullenly, going back to his hot dog. “That’s sad, Buck. A tragedy.”

He can hear Gale shrug beside him. “Not really a big sports fella’ in general.”

John turns to face him much slower this time, because *what*? Gale doesn’t notice, now occupied in enjoying his hot dog. A few solid seconds go by of John staring at him in disbelief and Gale oblivious to it.

“You are literally the captain of our football team.”

Gale abruptly laughs at John’s deadpan tone at first, raising a hand to cover his mouth as he finishes chewing. “Yeah, that I am,” he replies with a smile.

That smile starts to waver before he speaks again, and that doesn’t go over John’s head this time. It looks like Gale’s contemplating on whether or not to continue, so John waits, intrigued by the popular boy’s change in demeanor.

“But, uh. Not really by choice, you know?”

John really didn’t know, actually. He had no idea. He was pretty sure nobody in their school thought the boy, the captain and star player of the team, wasn’t playing by choice. He played the game well, and he played the role that came with it well.

Gale doesn’t look at him as he continues.

“My dad, he loves football. Or, well, he loves gamblin’,” Gale continues quietly, like someone might hear them. He swallows heavily, crumpling the tinfoil from their food in his hand as he lets out a self-depreciating laugh. “You’d- you’d be surprised on how many people bet on high school games.”

John tries not to let the shock show on his face. If Gale was saying what he thought he was saying… well, he didn’t even know what to think if Gale was saying what he thought he was saying.

For the second time today (well, third, if you’re counting John being

horrified by him not having been to a baseball game, but he wasn't), Gale Cleven had genuinely surprised him. Whether it was in a good or bad way, he wasn't sure yet. He was sure, however, that the school's super star suddenly seemed a lot more human and a lot less picture perfect.

He was almost disappointed. When he'd invited Gale, he'd already had his mind made up about what the quarterback would be like. He knew what to expect. He didn't expect this, and he didn't expect to kind of *like* the guy.

Gale's looking at him now, like a dear caught in headlights after realizing what words had come out of his mouth. "I-I don't know why I told you that. I've never told anybody that."

John doesn't know why he told him, either.

He ponders on what to reply, because *what the fuck does someone say to that,* and he settles on not digging again. It seemed like a wound Gale hadn't been ready to open up, anyways.

"Daddy issues, huh?" He quips, wrapping his own tinfoil into a ball. He winds his arm back, aims for the trashcan all the way at the base of the bleachers, and sinks it in. Triumphantly, he turns back to Gale with the most understanding smile he can muster. His dad had died when he was young, and he wasn't very good at this comforting thing. "Gotta' love 'em."

Gale blinks in that doe-like way of his again. For a second, John thinks he'd said the wrong thing. But then a smile starts to creep onto the blond's face.

"Yeah, gotta' love 'em," he replies, and it's obvious it's softer than

either had thought it'd be. Gale clears his throat, changing the subject. "This… was a good hot dog, by the way."

John's grin is so wide at this that it almost hurts. "You're damn right it was."

The two high schoolers spend the rest of their time at the stadium chatting about more light-hearted topics. Mostly, it's John info-dumping to Gale about baseball. Gale lets him go on, actually seeming to be listening intently, for a lot longer than most people do.

By the end, both are laying side by side horizontally on separate metal planks. John's on the one above Gale, both now having gone quiet and just appreciating the beautiful day and clear sky.

Gale breaks the silence, asking a question John didn't have a good answer for.

"Why did you want me to come, by the way?"

He turns to study the boy who'd accompanied him on his prison break. Gale's still staring upwards with his arms behind his head. John knows what this was, and he knew what it wasn't.

Despite the events that had unfolded, he knew that when tomorrow came and he passed Gale in the hallway, the two would go back to their respective roles and ignore each other. It felt inevitable. Sneaking away with John Egan had been one thing, but being seen with him by other students? That wouldn't be very good for Gale's reputation, John thought to himself sourly.

“I wanted to see the king get his hands dirty,” he says with a forced smirk.

It’s meant to be a joke, but it’s clear Gale doesn’t think it’s funny. His face has went blank entirely, actually, like he’s shut down. And, well, it isn’t funny, it had been an asshole thing for John to say and he knew that.

But it’s true, partially. John can’t change that those had been his original intentions.

Gale gets up without saying anything and without looking at him, and John tries to act like he doesn't regret what he’d said. It was too late now, anyways.

“We should get goin’, yeah?”

John does regret what he’d said. A lot.

“Yeah.”

-

Chapter End Notes

ooooo why’s gale nervous about why he punched Chickkkkkk? (That’s the guy who replaced Huglin in the show btw if anybody missed that detail!)

I really enjoyed writing this chapter, I hope you guys enjoyed it too < 3

Let me know your thoughts in the comments down below!

Chapter 3: getaway car

Chapter Notes

sports terms to know for the chapter:

point shaving - the illegal practice of purposely limiting the number of points scored to conform to the needs of corrupt gamblers.

scramble - play where the quarterback runs the ball forward from behind the line of scrimmage themselves instead of passing it (usually when out of other options).

rushing touchdown - play where the runner carries the ball into the end zone with no forward pass being involved.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-

it was the best of times, the worst of crimes
i struck a match and blew your mind
but i didn't mean it, and you didn't see it

-

John and Gale spend the entire car ride back to Huglin's car in a silence that's so thick with tension, he thinks he could cut it with his pocket knife.

What kind of tension, well, John wasn't sure about that. He's just glad the trip isn't a long one.

They climb back in through the window and return to their prior seating arrangement, just in time for Huglin's phone alarm to go off and startle the man out of his substance-induced sleep. Wiping the drool from his mouth and smoothing out his hair, the Colonel starts talking to them like he hasn't spent the entire last hour and a half passed out cold.

"All right, Egan, get the hell out of my sight."

He tries to think of something sarcastic to say back, he can tell Huglin is expecting it, but for once he can't. He quietly collects his stuff and so does Gale, and the two both make their way to the door without acknowledging each other. Behind him as he's entering into the hallway, he hears Huglin clap Gale on the shoulder.

"I hope I don't see you here again, Cleven. We need you in the big game tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," he hears Gale say in reply, and he wonders if the colonel notices the thinly veiled half-heartedness to the quarterback's tone. He wonders if he didn't know what he did now, if he would've even noticed himself.

He probably wouldn't have, and it makes him sad for Gale.

For a second, he pauses in the doorway and contemplates saying *have a good game tomorrow* or *I'm sorry* or something dumb like that. He doesn't get a chance though, because Gale pushes right past him.

He watches the blond get about halfway down the hallway, before turning and going the opposite way towards where his bike was.

If he had looked back, he would have saw Gale stop right before turning the corner to watch him push through the double doors.

He doesn't, though.

He wouldn't realize until unfortunately much later that it probably would've saved them both a whole lot of heartache if he had.

-

The next day, John goes to his English class for the first time in at least a week.

He would die on the hill that it didn't have anything to do with Gale Cleven, he just knew midterms were coming up.

(It definitely had everything to do with Gale Cleven.)

When he strolls into the classroom, he spots him immediately. He's sitting at the very front, the overachiever. Instead of this making John grimace like it usually did, he kind of finds it…. endearing.

What the fuck was happening to him?

Gale is talking with another blonde sat on top of the desk next to him, her long tan legs crossed and he can see she's purposely grazing her

boyfriend's calf with her shoe.

Marge wasn't even in this class, and he kind of really wanted her to leave.

"Egan, look who decided to show up for once," his teachers voice cuts through his thoughts. Every student in the room turns to look at him.

Usually, he would lap up the attention. He loves any kind of attention, good or bad. This time though, he can feel Gale's eyes on him, too.

And it puts an uneasy feeling in his stomach that he doesn't recognize.

Still, he plasters his signature cocky smile on his face. "Someone had to show these dodo's how to properly dissect Hamlet."

The teacher looks shocked John even knows where they are in the class material. Which is fair enough since he'd attended barely half the classes.

"Just take a seat, Egan. Marge, as lovely as your presence is, I do have to ask you to leave."

Yes, please, John thinks as he watches the cheer captain hop down and give Gale a prolonged kiss that's… not super appropriate for a classroom setting.

"See you at lunch, handsome" she purrs to him, voice sweet as sugar.

He can almost feel a fucking cavity forming from it.

She finally leaves, and John takes his usual spot in the back of the classroom next to his friend Harry Crosby: aka the reason he wasn't behind in this class.

"Thanks for last week's notes, Croz," John says cheekily as he settles in next to the boy.

The latter rolls his eyes at him, but he doesn't flinch away when John punches his shoulder in a friendly manner. Crosby is actually one of the few people in the school who enjoyed John Egan's presence, and is even grateful for it. Crosby was never much of a fighter, but because of his small stature he did get picked on here and there. John coming around had put a stop to all of that.

"Yeah, yeah, Bucky. You know, you should *really* start showing up. You're gonna get held back again."

The nickname makes John smile. Only those closest to him called him by it, but he preferred it to his actual name by far.

Crobsy, well, he wasn't wrong. However John, despite his bad attendance, was actually doing pretty well in his classes this year grade wise; he didn't have below a C+ in any of them. Besides, he was pretty sure the new blonde, very Russian principal would let him slide even with how much school he'd missed. You could say that she had a soft spot for him.

Their attention is drawn back to the front of the room as the teacher begins the lecture. He knew by checking the syllabus that today they

would be debating Hamlet's controversial sanity. John didn't *actually* plan on participating. He'd already read the Shakespearean play a few years ago.

He read a lot, actually. Not a lot of people knew that- nobody probably knew that. But John had always had trouble coping with his emotions, and literature that reflected his own feelings he couldn't quite figure out had always been one of his many, many vices.

The lecture wraps up, and the time to share their thoughts comes and the first one to raise his hand is his current fixation himself.

Those plans on not participating subconsciously change.

"He was pretendin'. He demonstrates multiple times throughout the play he's perfectly capable of sane behavior," Gale's strong voice rings throughout the classroom with confidence. "And even without all of those moments, he told Horatio and Marcellus that he planned to 'put an antic disposition' on. He was-"

"Was he, though?" Everyone in the classroom turns to look at him. He, too, was surprised at his outburst, but he goes with it. "Was he fully pretending?"

Gale's staring at him with hard eyes. He doesn't look amused in the slightest. "Yeah, he was."

The teacher interrupts both of them, telling John to raise his hand next time. "Continue, though, I'm sure the class would benefit from hearing both of your sides."

John's gaze hasn't wavered against Gale's. He has to hold back a smile as he has a repeat of the thought he'd had during their first ever conversation in detention yesterday.

Oh, this is gonna be fun.

"He was already going mad in the beginning of the play," John says, leaning back in his chair to feign indifference. He see's Gale's jaw tick at this. "He just decides to embrace it by faking it, whether he realizes it or not."

And maybe John relates a little too personally to his statement, but they're going back and forth too quickly for him to really think about it.

Gale shakes his head at him, clearly frustrated. "That's- no-"

"He treats the ghost he sees like an Angel. He's the only one who see's it, Buck," his smile is coy as he uses the nickname he'd given him yesterday. "That sound like a sane man to you?"

If Gale's eyes could've gotten anymore fiery, they did. "'I essentially am not in madness, but mad in craft,'" he quotes, referring to one of Hamlet's many monologues in the text, almost spitting the words out.

John's eyes must be full on twinkling with mischief, he's sure. Two can play at this game.

"The spirit that I have seen may be the devil, and the devil hath power t' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and *perhaps*-'" he pauses, drawing the last syllables out longer than necessary and he almost thinks he sees

Gale's stare flicker to his mouth as he does so. "'-out of my weakness and my melancholy, as he is very potent with such spirits, abuses me to *damn* me.'"

Gale's angry features have loosened into something less so after he finishes, though John doesn't know into what. He watches as the other man does that familiar slow blink at him, then furrows his eyebrows like John is a puzzle he can't figure out.

Any other blows they might've delivered to each other are put to an end when the bell rings to signal the end of class. The reality was that both were correct in their own way, and both knew that deep down, but neither wanted to back down and give the other the satisfaction of being right.

Their teacher claps gleefully, thanking the class for a good discussion. John gets up quickly, hoping to catch Gale before he leaves, but the blond flees the room like it's on fire. John can't say he blames the guy. Where John had probably owed him some kind of an apology, he'd just made things worse without really thinking about it to have a little bit of fun.

John had a shitty habit of doing that a lot.

His teacher, with his heavy British accent and stupid mustache, stops him on his way out. "It would be nice to hear more from you, John. It's clear you undersell yourself."

John shrugs him off. He hadn't ever even bothered to know the guys name, never came to class enough to remember it, and he didn't really care to stick around and learn it now.

"Don't count on it."

-

John asks his friend Curt Biddick to go to the football game going on tonight with him, and the New Yorker looks at him like he'd just grown an extra head. They were leaning up against a wall at the back of the school during lunch, a half-ass attempt at concealing themselves while they open up a fresh pack of cigarettes.

"Why tuh' hell would yous wanna do that, Bucky?"

John literally does not have a good response to this. Well, he does, but it's not one he wants to say out loud or even to himself really.

"Change of scenery," he decides to go with.

And they really didn't have anything better to do later, so Curt brings the now lit cigarette to his lips, shrugs, and agrees.

John takes an extra long drag when it's passed to him.

-

The stadium is packed full of people John *really* did not care to be around.

Luckily, him and Curt spot Crosby sitting with his girlfriend Jean smack dab in the middle of the bleachers. They make their way there, and John has to stop Curt from starting shit with two different people that had accidentally bumped into them in just the short time it takes them to get there because the guy was even *more* of a hot head than *he* was.

"*Easy,* tiger," he tells the shorter man as he pushes him down with force into the seat right next Croz.

Curt waves him off, going to throw his arm dramatically around Croz and almost knocking the other man into his girlfriend. The two start catching up and John tunes them out to search the field for the reason he'd decided to come to begin with.

It takes him a minute, but eventually he spots Gale on the sidelines sitting on the bench. He has his head down, but he can see the number on the boy's white and blue jersey. He hadn't ever known what it was before.

And, funnily enough, it's John's lucky number: 2.

Not that that really means anything, of course.

Right?

The referee blows the whistle, and before he knows it the game is in full swing.

He'd always known Gale was a good player even without having gone to a game besides to maybe smoke a blunt or drink under the bleachers. It's the #1 topic of conversation during the season from September to around December, so avoiding the quarterback's name is almost literally impossible.

Despite all that, he'd never realized *how* good.

Gale Cleven, for someone who said he didn't like sports nor want to be playing, was fucking *amazing* at football.

John watches, eyes glued to the field, as Gale shuffles backwards and searches for a wide receiver to pass to with now barely 30 seconds of the 2nd quarter left. The other players from the away team are pressing in on their offense and there's nobody open. He can feel the crowd around him buzzing with excitement, and if he's being honest, he's buzzing with it, too.

Before he can blink, Gale makes the last minute decision as the clock gets down to 25 seconds left to do a scramble and carry the ball down the field himself instead of passing it.

The way Gale breezes through the other team's attempts to tackle him, ducking under one player's arm and shoving the next away by the chest, could be described as nothing other than elegant. How light and quick he is on his feet, if the boy wasn't so good at throwing the ball he'd say he was wasted as a quarterback.

Everyone around him goes crazy, standing in their seats, and he can't help but shoot up to his feet with Crosby and Jean as well even though his friend who'd accompanied him doesn't do the same.

Gale runs an incredibly impressive 42 yards all the way to score a rushing touchdown, and John finds himself howling and clapping along with everybody else when it happens.

The adrenaline he feels from the play as he watches Gale throw the ball down in celebration and get swarmed by his enthused teammates has him smiling and breathless, but it's all sapped out of him when Gale points to the sidelines.

John follows the motion with his eyes, and see's who Gale is singling out almost immediately.

It's Marge, shiny blonde hair tied high in a ponytail, jumping up and down in her cheerleader uniform with the same colors to match Gale's. She ruffles her pompoms, then blows Gale a kiss that he pretends to catch.

Witnessing the interaction, he can see now more than ever before how the two were the 'It' couple of the school. It makes sense. Of course the quarterback and cheer captain would be together, it's the biggest cliché there is in high school.

And John, a walking degenerate cliché himself, has never hated clichés as much as he does in this moment.

"What in the puke-worthy-school-fuckin'-spirit has gotten into ya', Bucky?" Curt says bewilderedly from his seat, and when he looks down he sees even Crosby and Jean, who had also been cheering, looking at him just as confused.

He winks at them to try to play it off, and it works. It always work. He sits down and doesn't get back up for the rest of the next quarter and he doesn't understand why he has such a sour taste in his mouth.

But then the fourth quarter comes, it's down to the last three minutes, and despite their three point lead he can tell that Gale is nervous even from the stands. His movements are less graceful and more hesitant. John leans forward with his elbows on his knees like it'll somehow help him see what's going on underneath the quarterback's helmet.

When Gale goes to throw his next pass, it's incomplete. Like, *really* incomplete. At first, John writes this off as an unfortunate fluke. It would be impossible for the boy, no matter how perfect he was, to make zero mistakes in the game.

But then it happens again, in the *exact* same way. And then it clicks for John. Gale isn't trying to score anymore points. He'd suspected it's what the football player had been hinting at yesterday when he said he played for his dad who liked to gamble, but now he knew.

Gale is *point shaving.*

And he's doing a really shit job at hiding it right now, too.

It's fourth down now, and when the center snaps the ball back to him he can tell Gale knows he can't repeat the tactic a third time. He delays throwing it too long, trying to find an out that doesn't give him away John can only assume, and he doesn't see the easily 280 pound linebacker coming straight for him.

Or maybe he did, and that's what his plan to not get another touchdown was.

Either way, he gets sacked so hard it knocks his helmet off and John swears he can hear the wind getting knocked out of him even from

where he is in the audience.

People around him gasp, some stand up, but John stays seated. He shouldn't feel the worry building in his stomach that he does, he'd just officially met the guy yesterday for Christ's sake, but it's there anyways.

He can feel Curt's eyes on him but his attention doesn't falter from the field.

60 seconds pass.

Then 2 minutes pass, and they still can't see Gale due to the referees and coaches crowding him.

Come on, Buck.

Gale is down for a total of 3 minutes, then the sea of people parts from around him and he sees Rosie Rothenhal hoisting Gale up from the ground and onto his own two feet. He's fine, and the referee signals for the game to continue.

"You gotta be fuckin' kiddin' me if yous actually dragged me tuh' this game because yous got a hard on for *Gale-fucking-Cleven."*

"Dragged is a bit of an exaggeration, don't you think?" John answers, not fully addressing the question at first because his mind is running laps around itself.

Because that *was* the reason, wasn't it? He'd spent barely two hours with the school's heartthrob and had fallen for his charm like a sucker.

John knew he liked boys the same way he knew he liked girls. He'd figured it out around 14, when Curt and him had kissed on a stupid dare.

To Curt, it was a joke. John very quickly realized it hadn't felt like a joke to him. Curt, the first boy he ever kissed and his best friend, had been the one he'd told before anyone else.

He hadn't told many other people, but a lot had deduced it by now. For the most part those who had an issue knew better than to mess with him, but he still got shit for it.

And a lot of those homophobic assholes… were people Gale associated with. A good 1/4 of the football team, actually. Maybe even more than that.

"The guy could nawt be more straight if he *tried,* Bucky. Even yous couldn't change that."

John feels like an idiot- a pathetic idiot. How had he let himself be reeled into Gale's fan club that half the student body was already in?

And because John really is kind of a fucking idiot sometimes, he turns to his friend that's laughing and shaking his head at him.

"You wanna bet?"

-

Chapter End Notes

should've said if 10 things i hate about you, breakfast club, and the movie after meets in the tags instead oops

also changed the class they share from chem to englishhh

and did my best to describe a football game lol, gale is a badass captain and player. born to lead

let me know your thoughts below! <3

Chapter 4: so high school

Chapter Notes

Going to expand/introduce some more of the characters from the show in this chap because I enjoyed them all sm and miss them. (rosie rosenthal I love you.)

As always, I hope you guys enjoy this chapter and feel free to find me on TikTok (same username) and share in my clegan love on there as wellllll.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-

i feel so high school every time i look at you
i wanna find you in a crowd just to hide from you

-

Curt and John agree that he has two weeks to make the All-American, captain of the football team, two-year-running homecoming king and student body president fall for him or he owes him 50$. Now John didn't care for the money, but he was known for his bets.

And on his list of stupid bets, this one was *definitely* a close second to when he'd bet some random popular kid that the transfer student Tommy (who he had not known for long at all) could throw a dart through an apple balanced on John's head.

Actually, that wasn't a stupid bet, because that's how he'd gotten his bike.

But that isn't the point, because obviously John had made this latest bet out of embarrassment and to save some face in the moment, but the point is that now he *has* to do it. John Egan *never* lost a bet.

Now he just needed to figure out how the literal fuck he was going to not do that this time around, because his best friend had been right: Gale was the poster boy for straight men.

Or… maybe he wasn't, because those lingering looks at where John's shirt had risen up on the bleachers or his lips when they'd been having their debate, they might have been in John's head.

But they also might've not been and, well, there was only one way to find out.

That predicament will have to wait though, because there's a house party tonight to celebrate the school's success on the field. And John may not be the football team's biggest fan or really one at all, but he never missed out on an opportunity to get wasted and forget about his problems. Unfortunately, for the bet's sake at least, it's unlikely Gale will be there. The quarterback was already a rare sight at parties to begin with, and he'd gotten hit pretty damn hard at the game earlier.

He's kind of relieved he won't see him so soon if he's being honest. The fact that he'd let his guard down so easily for some jock who had probably not thought about his existence even once before they'd met in detention was still eating at him. (Gale had known his name, but he was trying not to think about that.)

Gale didn't drink, he didn't like sports, and he didn't party. John had

no idea why he had enjoyed hanging out with the boy when they couldn't be more different and, even worse, developed some dumb crush on him like every ditsy female in and not in their grade.

A few hours after the football game, Curt picks up John at his house with Crosby and an enthusiastic Bubbles in tow.

“Bucky!” The blue eyed, brown haired boy cries. He leans forward from the backseat to shake John by the shoulders as a way of greeting when he hops into the passenger’s side.

“You tink blondie is gonna be dere tonight?” Curt asks, voice smug as he peels out of John’s driveway.

John shoots him a look and Bubbles, out of the loop, chimes in again from the back. “Who’s blondie?”

John slumps down in his seat, taking a swig from his flask he’d brought.

“Don’t worry about it.”

-

The party is well underway by the time the four boys arrive.

It must be packed inside because there's an abundance of people overflowed onto the front lawn. In just their short walk to the front porch, they pass somebody already passed out in the bushes. Curt rubs his hands together and throws his arms around him and Bubble's shoulders in a way that lets John know this is going to be one hell of a night.

And it is.

It's barely been an hour and Curt and him are very, very trashed while Crosby and Bubble's are nursing their second beer.

But despite being absolutely plastered, his best friend and him are *dominating* at the beer pong table.

"How are they *this good*!" Nash exclaims to Rosie as John makes his third cup in a row.

Curt has the most shit-eating grin on his face and he's sure his own mirrors same. The two football players had talked a big game, and now they were losing by five cups. Meaning, they'd only made one in, while Curt and John had made six.

Both Rosie and Nash miss their next shots again, and the crowd that's gathered around them lets out a collective *ohhhhhhh!*

"That was too much of that," John cries, opening and closing his hand to mimic a mouth moving, "that's what that was!"

Nash puts his head dejectedly in his hands and Rosie pats his back while trying to convince him that it isn't over yet.

“Can I get them into a tight pussy, boys?” John requests now that they only have four cups left, meaning he wants them in diamond formation in beer pong language.

“Tah’ opposite of Rosie’s mama’s!” Curt declares, and both Crosby and Bubbles who had been in the middle of taking sips of their beers almost spit the drinks right back out from how hard they double over laughing.

Rosie is cracking up, too, knowing it’s all in good fun. Rosenthal was easily the second best player on the team, and despite the reputation jocks had at their school, there wasn’t a single bad thing anybody could say about Rosie Rosenthal. He was genuinely a good dude.

Following Curt’s jest, him and John both make their next two shots. Then they get balls back because of it, and they make those, too.

John picks Curt up, spinning his smaller friend who has his hands raised in victory around before setting him back down to shrug at the two boys at the end of the table.

“Sorry fellas, you can’t win em’ all!” He proclaims cockily, obviously referring to their big win at school earlier.

Rosie shakes his head at him, a playful but determined look in his eyes. “Run it back, Egan!”

And John would’ve been more than happy to do a rematch, but his ears perk up when he hears what’s just started playing over the speakers.

They're playing *his song.*

Curt notices, too. "Oh, boy. Here weh' go."

"It's *my song,* Curt," he states both dramatically and apologetically. He hands off his ping pong ball to Crosby, who looks at it like he'd just put a bomb in his hands.

He salutes his boys, downs his drink, and then takes off into night.

-

Downing that last drink before leaving his friends might not have been John's best idea considering it had still been mostly full and he had already been pretty wasted. Evidently, most of John's ideas weren't the best ideas lately.

He gets to the room of the house where people are dancing. It's a dimly lit living room filled to the brim with moving bodies. His vision is blurring at this point, but his eyes land on a coffee table in the center. It looks sturdy enough, not that that would've stopped John anyways.

He clambers on top of it and the attention in the room immediately shifts to him. There's cheers, there's laughs, and if they're for him or at him he doesn't really care because 1) he's drunk and 2) this is *his song.*

But then his song comes and goes, and he's still on the platform above everybody. His curls are matted to his forehead with sweat, and the walls are definitely moving at this point- or the table is. He's not sure which, but it's definitely one of them.

"John," a voice calls out from the faceless crowd, and he turns around in his dancing to face the direction it comes from. Or what he thought was the direction, as the voice comes from behind him the second time. "John, I think it's time to get down."

When he turns again, he almost falls over but someone's sturdy arm reaches out and just barely steadies him before he can topple off the table and hit the floor. He has to blink a few times for his eyes to adjust to who, and then he's looking down at the stunning face of Gale Cleven.

"Buck!" He shouts, causing himself to almost stumble again. "*Just* the man I was looking for!"

Instead of Gale's expression immediately contorting into an irritated one at the unwanted and unclaimed nickname like it had all the times John had used it prior, Gale just looks concerned.

At least John thinks he looks concerned; he's kinda seeing two of the guy right now and it's honestly pretty hard to focus on either of them.

"You're gonna fall, John, come on," Gale tries again, beckoning him with his hands to step down.

And John is still semi-conscious, not quite blackout yet, so he knows deep down that Gale is right. He is definitely too drunk to be standing

on an elevated surface right now. But he's been much, much drunker and done much, much worse.

So he isn't gonna make it easy for the blond. He'd made a bet, after all, and he has a timeline.

"*Make* me."

At his taunting words, that frustrated look John is so good at putting on Gale's face makes an appearance. "I'm not going to ma-"

And then Gale is interrupted by John accidentally doing exactly what Gale had said he would if he didn't get down: he falls.

He smacks his head on the ceiling fan because of how damn tall he is on his way down, and then he lands right in the captain of the football team's arms.

-

Chapter End Notes

(if you aren't familiar with beer pong yes it really is called that lol)

I usually like to post chapters longer than this, but your comments on the last chapter were so excited and lovely I wanted to post what I had so far :)

The next chapter will come soon! I'll update this story at least every other day if not every day like I did with my last clegan fic.

let me know your thoughts and feelings in the comments! they

mean so much when I read them <3

Chapter 5: peter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-

and i won't confess that i waited, but i let the lamp burn
as the men masqueraded, i hoped you'd return

-

To his credit Gale had mostly caught John, which was impressive because John wasn't a small guy.

However, emphasis on mostly, because they had still ended up a tangled mess of limbs on the carpet with John crushing an already injured Gale with his full body weight.

Gale doesn't hesitate to roughly shove John off of him which is understandable. John would probably apologize, if his head wasn't absolutely *killing* him to the point that it couldn't get the message across to move his mouth.

"I *told you* you were gonna fall, you loony."

John can only groan in reply, tossing and turning on the floor trying

to figure out which way is up from down. He feels hands on the side of his head and then hears Gale let out a soft curse.

"You're bleedin'," he tells John and it sounds like the guy is talking to him from behind a wall of glass. His ears are ringing and *holy fuck* his head is seriously, seriously killing him.

He can feel himself being pulled to his feet and his arm being thrown over a shoulder. Vaguely, he can make out Gale asking somebody where the nearest bathroom is. Then he's being dragged down a hallway, and then another hallway, and then Gale is muttering under his breath about why the house *has to be so goddamn big* and why John *has to be so goddamn heavy*.

By the time they finally get to a bathroom, John's starting to gain some of his senses back. Gale all but kicks open the door and scares the shit out of some poor freshman just trying to take a piss.

"S-sorry! I'm about to be done in just a…"

The freshman trails off, eyes switching back and forth between Gale and John. No doubt trying to put the pieces together on why the quarterback and the school's troublemaker were both standing in front of him right now. He can feel Gale starting to shift uncomfortably next to him, trying and failing to think of something to say. John takes pity on him.

"Get the fuck out," he barks at the kid with no bite because he is literally *barely* standing up. Still, it has its desired effect and the kid zips up his pants without any questions and is out of the room within seconds.

Gale is chuckling a little to himself as he gingerly helps John get

settled on the toilet lid and shuts the door behind them with his foot.

"*What*?" John snaps half-heartedly. "Me busting my head open funny to you?"

"For one," Gale starts as he turns the sink on and snags a washcloth from the stack on the counter, "I *told you* that you were gonna fall. And two, no, I just think how scared some people are of you is funny."

He does his best to sit up straight from his doubled-over position he'd been in previously as Gale makes his way back over to him with a now wet rag. The blond, very unexpectedly, goes to stand between John's two legs and uses his free hand to tilt his bleeding head upwards by his chin.

The first thing John thinks at the touch and proximity is that Gale's hands are a lot softer than he'd expected them to be. The second is that he smells really, *really* good.

He pushes both of these thoughts away immediately and Gale's hand doesn't linger longer than it should on his face.

"Hmmm," he mumbles lazily, still pretty out of it, as Gale starts to gently dab at his forehead in the spot where he'd thumped it on the ceiling fan. "Are you saying you're not afraid of me, Buck?"

The smile Gale tries to fight draws John's gaze to his lips. "Afraid of you? No. Annoyed of you? Yes."

John is about to give a likely obnoxious reply when he's hit by a very sudden and intense wave of nausea and dizziness. "I think I… I think I

need to take a nap," he says as he starts to slump forward.

"No, no, no," Gale lectures, quick to grip him by both of his shoulders and force him back up. "Not until we know if you have a concussion or not."

And because John is still drunk, and because he *really* would like to just go to bed, he looks up at the boy just trying to help him with disdain that is no doubt leftover from Curt mocking him over fancying the football player. "Why do *you* care? We just spoke for the first time yesterday."

Gale is quiet. He clears his throat, dropping his hands from John's shoulders and going to pick back up the now red washcloth. "We've met before, actually."

And if John's head wasn't already spinning because of his possible concussion and liquor intake, it was whirling like a fucking merry go round now.

When Gale closes the distance between them and goes back to cleaning him up this time, John can tell he's very pointedly trying to keep his eyes on his wound and only his wound.

"It was the summer that, um, your dad died," Gale continues hesitantly. John can't get himself to do anything besides blink dumbly up at the boy who is doing everything he can to not look at him. "You guys would always play baseball in that park at the end of the street. And after he passed you'd sit there for hours by yourself with the same bat and mitt but you'd never use them. I'd walk by with my dog and you'd be there every day, same time, like clockwork."

While he doesn't remember that summer well, he can almost perfectly

remember the park Gale is talking about. It wasn't much of a park, just a slide and some swings with benches here and there. The field, however, was huge and that's all John had cared about. It was perfect for impromptu baseball games, and that's exactly what he and his dad had used it for. He feels tears start to well in his eyes.

John has spent a lot of time actively trying to not think about his dad; he's used a lot of drugs and drank a lot of alcohol to not think about his dad.

Gale, still purposefully focused on John's cut, thankfully doesn't notice the emotional moment he's having before he can force it away.

"It went on like that for about a week, and then my ma gave me the idea to take my own mitt down there with me and see… see if ya' wanted to play. It took me a few times to get your attention, you were so lost in your head," Gale's tone has a sadness to it now and his movements are slower. "But then I did, and you said yes. You never- you never swung the bat again with me, you always brought it, but we would just play catch every day."

At Gale's words, he sees a flash of two little pairs of shoes dirty from hours spent running in the mud, of small sticky hands holding his own and smiles with missing teeth, but then as quick as it comes it goes.

"And then after about a month, you stopped showin' up." Gale backs away from him now, going to wring out the bloodied rag in the sink. Once he's done, he stands there for a minute and just stares down at the drain. "My ma eventually told me she'd heard that your ma had made a last minute decision to move you both back in with her folks for a while over in Wisconsin."

John is speechless. When Gale finally brings his eyes to meet his from across the bathroom, he can't think of anything to say.

“You, um,” he pauses and licks his lips uneasily. He somehow feels painfully sober all of the sudden. “You live on the same street as me?”

One corner of Gale’s lips quirks up. “Always have.”

As Gale then starts to rummage through different cupboards for more first aid supplies, John asks the question of the hour.

“Why did you never say anything when I came back for middle school?”

Gale pauses in his search, looking contemplative. “Well, we weren’t kids anymore,” he answers as he slowly starts to move things around on the shelves again. “It had been 4 years, and… and it was just a few games of catch.”

He can’t tell if Gale had said the last part for John or for himself. Either way, he finds some bandaids and brings them over to wear John is still sitting.

“Besides,” the blond says, chuckling light-heartedly. “You didn’t seem too keen on makin’ friends.”

And that’s extremely fair, because John had picked a fight with just about anybody who’d looked at him when he’d first come back to Wyoming. It’s where most of the reputation he has now stemmed from.

“I don’t remember any of that,” John says apologetically. Besides

those fleeting images that had popped up in his head just a few moments ago, most of that summer was and always has been a blank.

Gale shrugs at this, digging around the inside of the box in his hands. “I figured.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Gale tells him and waves the words off. “Most people don’t remember small stuff from when they were seven. Plus, you were goin’ through a lot.”

You did, John wants to say. But he doesn’t, because it feels like it would be an accusation somehow if he had.

“Oh this one’s *perfect,”* Gale exclaims with renewed excitement. He finally wields a bandaid in front of John’s face, taking it out of the package with an oddly smug grin. As soon as it’s peeled, he sticks it on the cut with a few pats for good measure.

John had been too taken aback by Gale’s story to actually take the time to look at the type of bandaids he had found. He does now though, and he sees that it’s a multipack of kid’s bandages with different characters on them. Catching on to Gale’s antics, he stands up and hurries to the mirror with wobbly legs.

Gale had put a Hello Kitty bandage on him.

He rolls his eyes at his reflection and he can see Gale *giggling* behind him. “Very funny,” he says dryly.

Despite his tone, he can't help the wide smile that starts to work itself on to his face as he watches Gale continue to laugh at his own joke in the mirror.

"It's a *little* funny, come on," Gale states, egging him on.

And it *is* a little funny; Gale definitely already knows John thinks it's funny. This dumb type of humor is right up his alley. There's an unfamiliar warm feeling blooming in John's chest, and he can't help but grin goofily back at the quarterback through their reflections.

Who knows how long they would've stayed doing that if Curt hadn't suddenly came bursting into the bathroom and almost hit Gale with the door.

"Bucky!" He cries once his eyes land on his friend leaned over the sink. "Jean found me and said sheh' saw ya come in all bloody and shit with…."

Curt's eyes are on Gale now. And his stare is very, *very* not subtle, Jesus Christ. John glances over at Gale nervously, but finds the boy already looking at him amusedly with crossed arms.

"You gave me your name?"

And somehow, because again John Egan is sometimes genuinely an idiot, the dots didn't connect in his head about how close the nicknames Bucky and Buck were to each other until literally this very second.

“It’s not *exactly* the same name and it’s not my fault you lo-“

Both Gale and Curt do their best to catch him before he can fully hit the ground as the dizziness makes a reappearance.

“You should probably get him checked out,” Gale tells John’s friend with no hint of humor on his face anymore.

Curt nods worriedly in reply and the two men pull him back up onto his feet. “Help me get him to tah’ cahr, would yous?”

And then John’s smaller friend talks his ear off the entire journey outside, catching him up on all the details of the party he’d missed out on. He tries his best to pay attention, but he’s hyper-aware of the heat coming from where Gale’s side is pressed against his. The two had each taken one of John’s arms and wrapped them around their necks because while John was 6’2”, Curt was 5’8” and definitely not capable of carrying him without assistance.

When they get to Curt’s car and the quarterback lets go, he feels especially cold in the spots where his touch had disappeared from.

Gale waits patiently until John gets settled in the front seat, and then once he is he goes to close the door.

John reaches out on impulse and smacks his hand on the doorframe to stop him, ignoring the millions of questions Bubbles and Crosby are shooting off from the backseat about what had happened to him. He feels the need to say something more.

“What’s, um, what’s your dogs name?”

Gale looks confused for a second and John internally winces at the stupid question and awkward timing, but then realization dawns on Gale's face that John is referring to the story he'd told him earlier.

"His name is Meatball."

"That's… that's a good name," John says lamely.

The quarterback cracks a crooked grin. "Thanks," he replies, shoving his hands in his pockets as he starts to walk away.

And John, completely out of character, can't come up with anything else to say. So he just watches silently until the blond disappears back inside the house. He eventually shuts the car door and Curt turns his key in the ignition.

"I cahn't believe I might actually lose this fuckin' bet," his friend says under his breath, sounding completely mystified as they pull away from the party.

Oh, he thinks numbly.

Right. The bet.

John had almost forgotten about that.

-

very
funny...
@zyabmn861
@zyabmn861

HEAVY!!!

[fanart by @zyabmn861 on tiktok]

Chapter End Notes

Back again with an update not even 24 hours later because I just love how invested so many of you guys are in this story makes me so excited to post to hear your thoughts and opinions ❤

(Edited to feature fanart by @zybmn861 on tiktok that I absolutely love and am so honored for them to have made for this fic!)

As always, I hope you enjoyed the chapter and let me know what you think below :)

Chapter 6: mastermind

Chapter Notes

This chapter is mostly to explain more of why John is the way he is, and to flesh out his character a bit more. I hope you guys enjoy :)

(I was planning on doing the “why did Gale punch chick reveal” in this chapter, but it didn’t feel like it fit so it will be in the beginning of the next one! A lot of you have actually kind of half guessed because it’s a cliché but this story is all about the clichés we love <3)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-

what if i told you none of it was accidental
and the first night that you saw me, nothing was gonna stop me?
i laid the groundwork and then, just like clockwork
the dominoes cascaded in a line

-

The doctor removes and throws away the Hello Kitty bandaid Gale had put over his gash.

He feels almost mournful over the loss of the inanimate object, but he’s obviously not about to ask to keep it because that would be a weird as fuck thing to do.

He's then informed that he, miraculously, does not have a concussion. Curt pats his back encouragingly at the news.

"Thank God, Bucky here ain't gotta whole lotta brain cells tah' spare."

He swats his friend's hands away at this, and the doctor doesn't laugh at the joke.

"How much have you had to drink tonight, John?" He instead asks with pursed lips, tapping his pen on the clipboard in his hands as he leans against the counter across from the two boys.

From his place on the bed, John gives him a cheeky grin. "Not a drop, doc."

Curt coughs to cover up his laugh and the doctor gives him a look that screams *bullshit.*

"John…" the older man starts, ripping off the top page of his notes as he walks towards him. "Your dad wouldn't want you to continue going down the path you've been going down."

John curses in his head at how small this fucking town is, because everyone and everybody knew his dad and what had happened.

It was like he could never escape being reminded that he's the kid whose dad got shipped off to Afghanistan and never came back.

He's trying to come up with a polite reply, when the doctor goes and

hands John the paper he'd tore from his pad. He looks down expecting a prescription for pain because of his head or something.

But instead what's written there… is the mental health help line.

John clenches it in his fist, crumpling it in his hands. When he looks back up the pity on the man's face makes him want to deck the guy.

John is fine. He's *always* fine, and he wishes people would stop fucking thinking otherwise.

Not feeling like spending the night in a cell, John pushes himself off the bed with extra force. "Yeah, well, he's dead," he says as he yanks his jacket off the chair it had been laid on and heads towards the door. "So we don't really know what the guy would want, do we?"

He follows up his harsh words by throwing open the door and getting out of there as quick as he can, not slowing down even as he hears Curt scrambling to keep up with him.

-

John walks into English the next day with arguably the worst hangover he's ever had in his life; and he's had *a lot* of them.

But he'd thrown on the darkest sunglasses he owned and dragged himself out of bed anyways because… well, there was no use in

denying it now.

He'd wanted to see Gale.

But only because he was supposed to be wooing the guy for a bet, obviously.

Everyone in the room turns to look at him just like last time and he's sure he looks goofy as hell with his dark shades and chunky bandage right above his eyebrow, but it's the absolute last thing on his mind.

Because when Gale turns away from where Marge is propped up on her usual spot on the desk next to him, he gives John that slow movie-star smile and a little inconspicuous wave of his pencil.

John bites his lip, trying to keep himself from grinning like an idiot. The effects the quarterback's smile has on people should really be fucking studied or something. He gives Gale a short nod for a greeting instead, and Gale's smile falters a little bit at it.

"Egan, take those ridiculous things off of your face."

Peeling his eyes away from Gale's, he turns his attention to his teacher. "My bad," he responds absent-mindedly, pushing the sunglasses back through his curls. The teachers confusion at his lack of a bitchy remark is apparent.

The fucking Gale Cleven effect, he thinks irritably as he goes to take his spot in the back of the class. He sees Marge out of the corner of his eye go to give her boyfriend her usual prolonged goodbye kiss, but Gale makes this one shorter than the rest when he pulls away quicker

than he typically does.

Hopefully, John muses to himself humorously, the guy had finally realized how cringey it was for everyone to have to witness that gross exchange every single godforsaken day.

Crosby doesn't acknowledge him as he sits down. Before he can ask what's up with that, the teacher is handing out a lengthy pop quiz since everyone should've finished reading Hamlet as of today.

John breezes through it, having read it a handful of times now. He's actually the first one to finish, and he can feel people looking up in satisfying confusion as he meanders through the sea of desks to the front of the room to turn it in. He doesn't try to hide his smirk when he places the test on the teacher's desk. The man looks up at him in bewilderment- like he'd just put a rotting fish there instead of paper.

When he turns back around, he sees Gale looking at him with surprise as well. His pink lips are parted like he'd say something to John if they weren't required to be silent right now. Feeling brazen, John makes sure to give the blond a wink as he passes by him.

And it might be the lighting, but Gale's cheeks look a little bit pink before he ducks his head bashfully at the gesture.

Crosby is the second to finish and he makes the trip to drop off his test and returns without so much as looking at John. He writes it off as the guy probably being in a shitty mood because he and Jean got into it or something like that, and then he slouches down in his seat to wait for the rest of the class to wrap their quizzes up.

"You trynna burn a hole in the back of the guy's head?" Crosby says eventually with an edge to his tone, snapping John back to reality and

making him realize that he had zoned out completely in his morning after stupor.

He looks at the clock and sees that there's only fifteen minutes of the class left. Rubbing his eyes and dragging a hand down his face, he lets out a sigh.

"Stare at him any harder and the dude is gonna spontaneously combust," Crosby mutters bitterly, nodding towards the front of the room where Gale is seated.

John hadn't even realized he'd been doing it in the first place.

"Whoops."

Crosby scoffs. "Yeah, whoops."

He's about to ask his friend something along the lines of *the hell crawled up your ass and died this morning,* but their teacher suddenly claps his hands together to get everybody's attention before he can.

"Alright, now that we've wrapped up our last unit for this half of the semester, it's time to talk about your midterm. Which is actually…. going to be a partner project."

There's a chorus of groans throughout the classroom because literally *nobody* enjoys a partner project. And then the British fuck goes and makes it worse.

“And I’m going to be picking your partners.”

The groans ring out again, but louder this time.

“You don’t always get to pick and choose who you have to work with in the real world, people. Moan and groan all you want but these are *necessary life skills!”*

With that, he starts to list off names. It takes forever for him to finally get to John. And if he hadn’t zoned out again, he probably would’ve realized there was only one other person left for him to be partnered with before it was announced.

“…. Harry Crosby and Sandra Westgate, and lastly…. John Egan and Gale Cleven.”

The room goes eerily silent, because of course it does. There's squeaks of chairs as people adjust themselves to no doubt try to catch either of their reactions. He rolls his eyes. High school can be *so fucking dramatic*.

Gale doesn’t turn around. He has his head down as he scribbles something into his notebook. John’s not naive enough to think the quarterback is thrilled about being grouped with him for a school assignment. After all, he’s still John Egan, the school’s resident burnout, and Gale Cleven is still very much the school’s can-do-no-wrong golden boy.

Not even whatever moment they’d shared in the bathroom yesterday, nor the ball they apparently threw back and forth as kids, would change that overnight.

The fact that Gale must be too embarrassed to even acknowledge the announcement still stings, though. John tries to pretend it doesn't. He slides his black sunglasses back down over his eyes to feign apathy as the assignment is passed out, because since when the fuck does he give a damn about what people feel about him?

(He is, unfortunately, starting to give a damn about what Gale Cleven feels about him.)

“Each pair of partners has been randomly assigned three poems that will share a common theme. You'll be putting together a presentation about both the different and similar literary devices each poem uses to get that theme across to its audience. It's due *next week*, or you fail the class. End of story."

The bell then rings with impeccable timing. John shoves the piece of paper he'd been handed into his bag without bothering to check what poems his and Gale's names fall under. He's sure Gale had likely already fled the room in a similar fashion as last time, so he doesn't bother to look up as he packs his stuff.

“Looks like everything is falling right into place for your little plan, huh?”

John glances over to see Crosby cramming his stuff into his backpack with an unignorable amount of irritation. He lazily quirks an eyebrow, because John has precisely zero idea what the guy has been going on about the entire class, and he's about to tell him just that when Crosby aggressively swings his bag over his shoulder and abruptly turns to him with a fuming expression he'd never seen on the quiet guy's face before.

"Curt told me about the bet you two made," his friend grits at him. "Kinda a shitty thing to put money on, don't you think? Gale's a good

guy."

Oh. That's what he'd meant when he'd said 'little plan.'

Well, fuck. *Why the hell would Curt tell him about that?*

John opens and closes his mouth probably at least five separate times as he searches for some kind of half-decent reply. His friend looks downright disappointed and John, a boy most would tell you is without any shame, is feeling pretty damn ashamed at the moment. "I-I never said he wasn't."

His reply seems to just piss off Crosby even further, but before Crosby can berate him more he's cut short by the subject of their conversation himself.

The blond looks sheepish with a hand scratching the back of his head and the other extended with a white slip of paper between his fingertips. "Sorry, uh, I was writin' down my information for you and then you two looked like you were havin' a serious conversation. I hate to interrupt, but I'm runnin' late to meet Marge for lunch."

John is incredibly grateful for his decision to put the dramatic shades back on his face because he's positive his eyes are wide and transparent as hell right now.

Gale Cleven is handing him his *fucking phone number.* And what looks like his address, as well. So that had been what he was writing down when John had moodily assumed he was ignoring him.

Crosby coughs awkwardly, pulling John out of his head to realize he

still hadn't taken the piece of paper Gale was holding out to him.

"Um, right," John says with as much nonchalance as he can manage in the moment. He takes the parchment from Gale and his breath hitches ever so slightly when their fingers unavoidably brush.

He'd smack himself for it right here and now if he could.

Jesus fuck does he miss the unbothered, callous guy he'd been before all of this bullshit.

Gale smiles at him in parting and it's like an involuntary bodily reaction when John smiles back without missing a beat.

"I get that you're fucked up, Bucky," his friend starts to tell him after Gale walks away. When John tears his eyes away from Gale's retreating figure, he sees that Crosby has softer eyes and a gentler tone than he'd been using before. “You-you’ve been through a lot.”

John says nothing and Crosby presses his lips together tightly as he shakes his head. It feels like the boy is seeing right through every wall John has spent years carefully and purposely crafting with what he says next.

"But that… that doesn't mean you get to go around fucking other people up for fun."

And then Crosby leaves, and John stands in place for a long time after.

-

Chapter End Notes

John WILL learn to not and stop assuming the worst of Gale at some point soon I promise lol.

This story has gotten really popular and I love the way you guys love it, so I'm gonna come up with a posting schedule so you guys know when to expect an update!

As of right now, expect updates:

Sunday
Tuesday
Thursday
Saturday

Also, so many people have came on TikTok and said hi and it's been so cute when some of you send me messages about the fic or TikToks that make you think of it or songs that remind you of it I eat it up makes my dayyy someone even mentioned making art/ an edit for it ??! <3 please continue to come find me and interact! My TikTok is the same as my user on here, and my tumblr is reminiscing-romance :)

let me know what you think below lovelies x

Chapter 7: sparks fly

Chapter Notes

Lots of John and Gale interaction in this chapter <3 I hope you guys enjoy!

Also no bad feelings to the real life Marge, this is fictional and based around the chemistry of the actors in the show. Nothing but respect to the people these characters were based upon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-

you're the kind of reckless that should send me running
but i kinda know that i won't get far

and you stood there in front of me just
close enough to touch
close enough to hope you couldn't see
what i was thinking of

-

"Why *the hell* did you tell Croz about the bet, Biddick?"

He can tell Curt hadn't heard John join him under the bleachers by the way the boy jumps at the boom of his voice. Once he registers that it's just him, he goes back to packing the blunt in his hands unconcernedly.

“You neva' told me naht to? Besides, you love tah' brag about your bets.”

"Yeah, but..." John trails off to swing his backpack down from his shoulders and settle next to Curt on the ground. He just sits there for a minute, still mulling over the conversation he'd had with Crosby. "This one's... I think this one's different, don't you?"

Curt halts in his movements at the seriousness of John's tone. John Egan is very rarely ever serious, and when he is it’s usually a bad time for everybody involved. He can feel his friend studying him and trying to gauge how to approach the situation.

“What I think...” Curt starts, voice contemplative, pausing to bring the blunt he’d been rolling up to his mouth to lick the wrap and seal it. When he’s done, he lowers his hands warily. “What I think is that yous been gettin' flak from the football team for *years,* Bucky.”

John stays focused on one of the metal beams in front of them because this isn’t exactly his favorite topic. John was bullied, yes. He’s eccentric, he’s loud, and well- he likes boys. But he has almost always been able to hold his own. It’s a rare and quickly stomped out occurrence when someone is brave enough to say something to his face these days.

He knew they still said it, though. And it had taken awhile as a kid to learn to not give a damn about what people thought, but he’d figured it eventually.

“And yeah,” the other man continues, sounding resentful, “Gale might notta been doin' it himself all this time, but we both know there’s no way he ain’t well aware of the shit those dickheads pull. He's *their captain.* And I neva' seen him do a damn thing about it.”

Curt then sighs as he flicks his lighter on and brings it up to the blunt.

“So whateva’ Croz said... look, it’s not like yous is trying to fuckin’ deflower the guy. Yah just… messin’ with his head a little.”

There’s some seriously flawed logic there, but he’s not exactly wrong. John can hear the distant sound of a gym class taking place on the football field as he takes his time to reply.

"Or yous can forfeit the bet. I won't cry about bein’ fifty dollahs richer."

He see his friend smiling playfully out of the corner of his eye and can’t help but laugh and shake his head, smiling back.

“Just give me the damn blunt,” John ripostes light-heartedly.

Curt is his best friend. Curt loves him, and he loves Curt. So, he could understand the boy’s lack of empathy for the people who’d played a part in making John Egan as rough around the edges as he is.

Curt passes it to him with a chuckle of his own, and the two then take turns hitting it in comfortable silence until it’s burnt through.

“Are you supposed to smoke pot when you have a concussion?”

John glances up to see Gale standing nonchalantly at the opening of the underneath of the bleachers. He’s in his gym clothes, hair damp with sweat from the heat.

The dude somehow makes basketball shorts and a simple fitted white tee look like a million bucks. It’s *ridiculous.*

For a second, he gets a wave of panic that Gale might’ve heard him and Curt’s conversation earlier. But the easy-going expression on the blond’s face assures him other wise.

“One, I don’t have a concussion,” John states in a lazy drawl, feeling the effect of the flower as he takes another drag. “And two, you’re confusing weed with alcohol sweetheart.”

He’s not expecting Gale to mosey over and plop down next to him. The quarterback leaves about a foot of space between them.

“Well, that’s good that you don’t have a concussion.”

John hums agreeably, putting the second blunt he’d lit for himself after Curt had left out in the dirt.

“How’d you know I was down here, anyways?” He gives the boy an exaggerated and roguish look of suspicion. “You stalking me, Buck?”

Gale scoffs flippantly next to him, but there's a small smile gracing his lips. "Don't flatter yourself, Egan. I saw Curt scurry out from under here smellin' like a skunk and figured you probably wouldn't be far behind."

John clicks his tongue, shrugging. "If you say so, Buck."

He'd used the nickname twice now to get a rise out of Gale, but he'd yet to react.

"You're not gonna correct me?" He asks provokingly as he then takes up a mocking tone to impersonate the quarterback. "'It's *Gale*, not *Buck,* John.'"

"Would it stop you?

"Definitely not."

Gale gives him a look that says *exactly*, and well, that's fair enough.

"So," John says after a beat of silence, drumming his fingers on his thighs. He lets his head fall back on the edge of a metal plank behind him, feeling relaxed in his high. "We're partners, huh?"

"So it would seem," Gale replies, collected and composed as always.

"You would've thought they'd paired together Taylor Swift and Kanye West with how the class reacted."

Gale gives him a confused look at this. “Whaddya mean?”

John goes to say *you know what I mean*, but when he turns to look at the blond he can tell by his scrunched eyebrows that he genuinely does not, in fact, know what John means.

“You’re the *student body president*, babe. I’m the *student body problem.* And if you haven’t noticed, our social circles don’t usually mix.”

Gale looks thoughtful, pondering John’s words.

“They probably all think I’m gonna like, corrupt you, or something.”

Gale gives John an unimpressed look at this. “That’d been your goal when we skipped out on detention, hadn’t it?”

John winces at Gale’s bitter tone. Yeah, he supposes he deserves that loaded comment.

He can’t imagine what Gale would say if he knew about the bet. But he pushes the thought down as quick as it comes, swallowing it thickly.

“I shouldn’t have said that,” he tells Gale sincerely.

Gale picks up a blade of grass, twirling it in his fingers. He nods solemnly in response. “I’m relieved that we’re partners, actually.”

John turns to him in surprise at this, and Gale seems to realize what he'd said needed further explanation. The blond scratches the back of his head, suddenly seeming nervous.

"I mean- you clearly know your, uh, stuff. I could've gotten paired with someone who doesn't. So I'm, well, I'm glad it was you."

He looks up at John now from where he's sitting next to him, being a few inches shorter. The nervousness is still there, but he can tell Gale is being genuine

Too genuine for John to handle.

The flower he'd smoked earlier has him feeling fuzzy and woozy in the head. His mouth is dry as he holds eye contact with the quarterback. It's hard to ignore how good looking the guy is right now. A single bead of sweat drips down from his golden hair, and John follows it with his eyes the entire journey it makes around Gale's shapely eyebrows, down the side of his nose, all the way until it stops at the curve of his cupid's bow.

Gale laughs a little awkwardly. "Do I have somethin' on my face?" He asks, reaching a hand up to rub at it.

John shakes his head wordlessly, still taking in Gale's features in his high, euphoric state. You'd think an artist had carved him from the finest stone they could find. His gaze finally trails upwards to meet Gale's eyes, which might just be his most breathtaking feature.

They're so blue he feels like a pilot in flight, staring into nothing but sky.

His mouth moves before his brain can catch up to what he's saying.

"You have ridiculously pretty eyes, Buck."

The boys lips part in shock at the unexpected words. John didn't even want to start thinking about his lips; his brain might actually short circuit in its already hazy state. He doesn't take back what he'd said, though it had surprised them both. He's sure he's not the first one to ever tell Gale that, anyways.

Well, maybe he's the first male to ever tell him that. But he supposes he has to start making moves on that bet at some point.

"I-I should probably get back to class," Gale tells him, breaking the intense eye contact and blinking to himself slowly. He pushes himself up onto two feet. "Coach, he uh, he told me I could walk around the track instead of participatin' in gym today because my- my ribs are still pretty sore. But he's probably gonna notice I'm not doin' that soon."

Gale's hands hang loosely at his sides, like he's not sure what to do next. John nods, sobering up slightly at the sight of how uncomfortable Gale looks. He's going to fuck this up by coming on too strong.

Gale hesitates in turning away still. "I'll text you about the project later, yeah?"

"Can't wait," he quips, an attempt at lightening the mood. "The dream team."

The corner of the quarterbacks lips quirk up.

“Don’t count on it,” he tells John, tongue in cheek, finally going to duck out from under the bleachers.

-

John is putting his things into his locker at the end of the day when someone snickers from behind him.

“Nice dance last night, fairy.”

Rolling his eyes, John turns to find no one other than Chick, the school’s infamous douchebag himself, leaning against the lockers across the hallway from him with some cheerleader hanging off his arm. His right eye is still purple and swollen from where Gale must’ve hit him. John smirks at the sight.

“You wantin’ a private show, Chick?”

It’s almost comical how quickly the guy’s face turns red; probably from both embarrassment and anger. He starts to take pissed off strides towards him, and John squares his shoulders in preparation.

He hasn’t been in a good fight in a while, and he’s had a shitty week.

He decides he'll even let Chick get a good blow in for fun.

He closes his eyes ready to feel a fist connect with his face, but instead a hand claps down on his shoulder. When he turns, he sees Gale standing next to him. Chick had come to a stop a few feet in front of them.

"There a problem, fellas?" Gale drawls, steeled eyes fixed on his teammate. His grip is firm on John's shoulder.

Chick notices this, eyes flicking down to where Gale was touching him and then back and forth between the two. A shark-like smile starts to creep onto his face and he lets out a demeaning chuckle.

"So that's why you punched me for saying Egan's a faggot just like his daddy probably was? Because he's your little boy toy, is that it?"

John lurches forward to give Chick a black eye of his own making at the mention of his dad, but Gale pulls him back swiftly with the hand he has on him and sturdily keeps him in place. He sees the boy's jaw tick and feels his fingers tighten on John's jacket.

"I gave a you a black eye because you're a piece of shit, Chick," the quarterback says, voice low and threatening like he'd never heard before. "And if you don't git goin', I'll give you a matchin' one for your other eye, you hear?"

The words and tone he uses go straight to John's crotch. Gale looks downright *sexy* when he's mad; it's almost criminal. And the fact that he's so worked up on *his behalf?*

It's a fleeting thought, however, because his attention is drawn back to the escalating situation at hand. It doesn't look like Chick's going to back down, probably not wanting to look like the wuss he was in front of the crowd that had gathered around them.

But then another figure comes up on John's other side and joins them in the face off. He can tell it makes Chick's resolve start to falter.

It's Rosie.

He's staring Chick down, chin tipped up in a way that says *I dare you.*

Chick takes a step back now, bowing his head. "Fuck the both of you," he spits, stomping away.

Gale releases John's shoulder with a squeeze once the guy has rounded the corner before turning to Rosie.

"Thank you, Rosenthal," he says to the other football player appreciatively.

John can't speak quite yet, still processing the exchange they'd all just had. He hadn't expected Gale to come to his defense, and he also really hadn't expected Rosie to. The two hadn't interacted much besides some competitive games of beer pong here and there whenever they ended up at the same party.

"Anytime," he tells them. He nods to John in acknowledgment, smiling before hiking his book bag further up onto his shoulder and heading past them down the hallway.

It's just Gale and John now, the curious crowd having dispersed once it was clear there wouldn't be a fight happening.

He knows he should also say *thank you*, or at least something along those lines, but he's honestly speechless at the gained knowledge of why Gale had struck Chick and ended up in detention. He didn't know what to think right now. Gale had defended him so viciously against his own teammate before they'd even really known each other.

Curt had been wrong.

"You wanna meet at my house and work on the project later?" Gale asks, soundly shutting John's forgotten open locker for him. He can tell that the quarterback is still wound up and would rather not dwell on what just happened.

He's about to reply when there's a squeal, and Gale's suddenly engulfed in his girlfriend's embrace.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

Marge smothers Gale with an exaggerated kiss on the cheek. Gale gives John an apologetic look at the interruption before leaning into it and greeting the cheer captain with a smile.

"Hi, darlin'," he tells her, bringing her to his side by wrapping an arm around her middle. "I was just makin' plans with John here to work on our project tonight."

She definitely hadn't noticed him standing there judging by the way she looks over in surprise. Her eyes then widen, evidently recognizing him. He gives her his brashest grin and she returns it hesitantly before giving her attention back to Gale.

The blonde girl pouts her painted lips. "I thought we were hanging out tonight, baby?"

Gale's face falls. "I'm sorry, Marge. I forgot."

John fights to keep his own face from falling in disappointment, assuming that Gale would cancel on him to cater to his girl.

He does the opposite, however.

"It's a… it's a really important project," Gale tells her reservedly. "And we're- we're on a time crunch. Would you mind if I took a rain check?"

They aren't even close to a time crunch considering they'd literally *just gotten* the project today, but John's not about to chime in and object.

Marge sighs, looking up at her boyfriend with fluttering eyelashes. "I *guess*…"

Gale pulls her closer, rubbing their noses together as a form of thank you. John can't help but think *gag me with a wooden fucking spoon.*

"Well," he says, clapping his hands together to startle them. "I'll leave

you lovebirds to it, yeah?”

Gale looks like he wants to say something but Marge cuts in before he can. “Nice to meet you,” she chirps pleasantly, but the politeness doesn’t reach her eyes.

John gives her a tight smile. He doesn’t return the sentiment before he leaves.

-

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was fun to write, congrats to those who guessed why Gale punched Chick lol. I hope the reveal scene didn’t disappoint!!

As always, please feel free to find me on TikTok @reminiscingromance for more Bucky and Buck content. (I recently reposted the cutest little photo edit user @louisemyat made of this fic on there, I’m obsessed.)

Let me know your thoughts, they mean a ton I love how many people are enjoying this story < 3

Chapter 8: you are in love

Chapter Notes

longer chapter bc the update is late i'm sorry my lovessss <3

also i hope you guys notice the random dialogue/details from the show i put/tweak into the story bc i so very much enjoy doing it it's like lil easter eggs

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-

you can hear it in the silence, silence, you
you can feel it on the way home, way home, you
you can see it with the lights out, lights out

-

Gale Cleven's house isn't what he'd expected it to be.

When he thought of the most popular kid in their class, he'd always for some reason lopped that in with being wealthy.

As he stands outside on the sidewalk inspecting the property, it just seems too simple for the school's dreamboat. It's two stories but probably only roughly around 1,500 square feet. He can't imagine there's more than two bedrooms. The white paint on the house is chipped in a noticeable amount of spots, and the yard could definitely use some work.

The place looks neglected, if he's being honest. It looks like it's been being neglected for a long time.

While his eyes are sweeping over the house, he sees lights flicker on in an upstairs window. The blinds are open and it's dark out, so he easily recognizes Gale as soon as the boy enters the room. He sucks in a breath that gets caught in his throat.

Because Gale is *only in a towel.*

The white fluffy linen is wrapped loosely around his waist and he has another in his hand to ruffle through his damp hair. Even from here, the glisten of water droplets left over from the shower make his tan skin look delicious. John's eyes take in his sculpted abs and broad shoulders, landing on the 'v' shape that disappears into the *dangerously* low hanging towel.

He feels the sinful desire to lick the wetness off the toned quarterback like a man who'd been stranded in a desert for years.

Gale disappears into a corner of the room that's out of his sight and John could almost *whine* at the loss. He peels his eyes away from the now empty box, pulling at the collar of his shirt to let some of the crisp night air in because *fuck* had it gotten hot suddenly.

It's then he notices the tree that grows next to the house with sturdy, long branches that extend to (but *thankfully* don't cover) the window of Gale's room.

He's struck suddenly with an idea.

In the last two days, the only moves he'd made on Gale had been a wink in passing and a compliment that had slipped out while he was stoned. He needs to start taking his pursuit of charming the captain of the football team more seriously.

So, he goes to climb the tree.

-

His knock on the window startles Gale to the point where he immediately drops the thick textbook he'd had in his hands.

The blond's eyes are wide as saucers from fright when they snap to where the unexpected sound had come from, but his expression quickly morphs into one that has *are you fucking kidding me* written all over it.

John gives him a toothy smile and a proud wave of his hand. The gesture has him almost losing his balance on the branch he's standing on and Gale rushes to throw open the window.

"Are you *crazy?"* The quarterback hisses at him, sticking his head outside to check if anybody had witnessed John in his stunt.

"Jury's still out," he replies, completely unworried, despite the fact that he would definitely break something if he fell from this height.

“I have *stairs!”*

“Now that wouldn’t have been very romantic, would it have, Buck?”

Gale pinches the bridge of his nose, tipping his head up like he’s asking a higher power for strength.

“Just get inside.”

John chuckles at the blond’s frustration, but does as he’s told.

Gale’s room is… interesting, to say the least.

It’s painted sky blue with a bunch of different cartoonish airplane stickers decorating the walls. And, well, you’d think it was a toddler’s room and not the room of a nearly 17-year-old boy.

“So you like planes, huh?”

Gale stills at the blunt statement, but doesn’t glance up at him from where he’d knelt to pick up the textbook he’d let fall.

“My ma’ decorated it for me.”

“You should probably let your mom know that you aren’t five anymore.”

“That would be kinda hard,” Gale tells him as rises to his feet and throws the heavy textbook onto his bed halfheartedly. “Considerin’ that she’s dead.”

Oh.

“Fuck, Gale,” John blurts, shocked. “I didn’t know.”

“You’re fine,” the blond replies placidly. He makes eye contact with John briefly, quick to shift his focus to rifling through school supplies from his desk before tossing them onto the bed to accompany the textbook one by one. “She died a few years after your dad. Cancer.”

John is swiftly taken back to their conversation in the bathroom and gets another rush of imagery, similar to the ones that had come to him as he sat on the seat of the toilet that night: he sees two small boys, one brown-haired and the other blond, lying in lush green grass while in a fit of giggles together.

He doesn’t know if it’s a memory or something his mind created for itself to fill in the gaps from the traumatic year that he now knew were there.

And he shouldn’t, because he hadn’t chosen to move across the country nor had he forgotten on purpose, but he feels a flare of guilt. Gale had been there for him, even if it was only for a brief moment in time, and he has no idea if someone had been there to do the same for that little blond boy who lives just out of reach in his head.

He wonders how different things would have played out between the two of them if he’d never left.

Luckily before John can say anything else stupid or get too into his head, Gale has already moved on from the conversation to sit cross-legged on top of his sheets so he can start to pour over their assignment.

“We should read n’ annotate the poems separately first,” Gale informs him firmly as he reads the rubric. “It’ll be easier to focus on the literary devices of one at a time instead of goin’ back and forth tryin’ to connect them all right away.”

“Also,” the quarterback adds before he can respond, peeking up at him impishly through his blond hair that had fallen into his eyes with an unexpected grin, “you just called me Gale.”

Motherfucker.

“That- that doesn’t count!”

“It definitely counts.”

-

They’d been grinding out their project for a good half hour when John can’t take sitting still anymore. He excuses himself to the bathroom to stretch his legs, and much to his disappointment Gale’s attention hasn’t wavered from their project when he comes back.

“Come *on,* let’s take a break.”

“We can take a break after we finish with annotatin’ at least the first poem, John.”

Letting out a dramatic sigh, John plops down heavily next to Gale on the bed and it causes the younger boy to bounce and nearly end up falling over into John’s lap by accident. Gale straightens himself out immediately and John can’t help but snicker a little.

“You put effort into being this obnoxious, right? Or does it just come naturally for you.”

“You like it."

Gale doesn’t reply.

Which isn’t a *no,* so John counts it as a win.

“Thanks for the show earlier, by the way,” John adds off-handedly when the blond tries to be boring and go right back to dissecting the text in front of him. “You should really close your blinds when you’re changing.”

He tries to come off as nonchalant as he can, pretending to read a random piece of paper he’d plucked from the ones scattered about the bed, despite the fact that he’d been nearly *drooling* when the event had happened. And it works, because he can see Gale’s face turn beat red out of the corner of his eye. He bites the inside of his cheek to keep

his smile from looking as smug as he feels.

Making Gale Cleven flustered might just be his new favorite pastime.

“Y-you didn’t have to *watch*!” Gale sputters indignantly.

“Relax, I didn’t see anything underneath the towel.”

Unfortunately.

Gale’s mortification is disrupted by the repetitive ping of a phone, and he feels the bed dip as the boy goes to retrieve it from his night stand. The face Gale makes at the screen piques his curiosity.

“Who is it?”

Gale is quick to put the device face down next to him. His demeanor is more serious now at the subject change, but the tips of his ears are still rose-colored.

“It’s just Chick. He’s pissed about earlier.”

John goes quiet at this. He’s gone over what had happened multiple times in his head by now, and he has about a dozen questions. One thing in particular, though, had been bothering him more than the rest.

“I am, you know.”

Gale flicks his eyes up from where he'd begun to return to reading their first poem and scrunches his eyebrows together at the brunet.

"Know what?"

John feels more nervous than he'd anticipated. He tries to swallow the feeling down, but his mouth feels ashy.

"That I'm gay," he finally says, voice uncomfortably tight. "Not gay, exactly, I guess bisexual is the technical term? I don't know. I like boys. Chick wasn't wrong about that."

It's Gale who goes quiet now, and John tries his best to avoid looking at him. He's had negative reactions to his sexuality more times than he could count, but it feels different this time.

"Yeah," Gale says apprehensively after a painfully long pause. He casts John a hesitant smile. "Yeah, I-I know that."

John is both relieved and confused.

"Why'd you… um, why'd hit Chick for saying so then?"

He'd tried to make it make sense in his head: why Gale, the star student of their school and everyone's role model, would strike a fellow teammate over calling a boy he scarcely knew a faggot. The comment about his dad was harsh and unnecessary, yes, but again, Gale *didn't know him.*

It seemed extreme to give someone a black eye on a stranger's behalf for a half-true insult, and he couldn't fathom that the minuscule time they'd spent together as kids would make him that protective of John that it was worth detention.

Gale seems to be mulling over the question, and for a second it feels to John that maybe Gale didn't even know for sure why he'd done it himself.

"I… didn't like his delivery, I guess."

The words feel like only half an answer, as John had gathered that much on his own. *But why*, he wants to know. *Why did it bother you so much?*

He doesn't get a chance to ask, because Gale's phone pings again. And then again, and then three more times.

"Jesus Christ, the fuck is he going on about?"

Gale turns his phone over, eyes sweeping across the notifications before he promptly clicks the power button to shut the screen off and drops it back to the bed with a shake of his head.

"Nothing true," he tells John rigidly, leaning forward to highlight a sentence on the parchment in front of him with a marker.

Now that is one loaded statement, John thinks. What did the quarterback mean by '*nothing true*'?

The phone goes off for a seventh time, and John can't help himself. He reaches over and snatches the phone up.

"*John*, no-"

He leans as far away from the other boy as he can manage to with both being on the same bed, keeping the phone tucked close to him so Gale can't steal it back.

"What if I just wanna say hi?!" He exclaims, feigning innocence.

Gale doesn't find this amusing and has his hand extended out, waiting expectantly for him to put the device there.

"The prick just wants to get a rise out of me, John, and I ain't gonna give him one. Give it back."

He, originally, had genuinely been curious as to what Chick was saying, but now he's just enjoying himself too much to stop. He feels the child-like glee of a little boy pulling on Gale's metaphorical pigtails.

"No."

Gale gives him an exasperated look and John grins unabashedly.

"Come on, just *try* to get it back from me. I bet you can't."

The hand Gale had been holding out between them falls at this.

“I don’t bet,” the blond tells him grimly.

John takes this in stride and shrugs.

“Probably better that way. I know quarterbacks can’t tackle.”

Gale’s eyes narrow at the verbal jab. Charged silence stretches between them.

He then suddenly lunges across the bed, but John had been ready for it and rolls out of the way. Gale, behind him on the bed now, is quick to go for it again. This time, he gets an arm around John’s waist to yank him backwards. John lets out a yelp when Gale’s fingers poke into his sides.

Gale freezes, and John waits, feeling his face heat up.

“Are you… are you *ticklish*?”

“….No.”

Gale experimentally jabs him in the side again, and John smacks his hand away; but unfortunately not before he makes an embarrassing noise at the contact.

“You *are*.”

“Get away from me.”

Gale does the opposite, instead using the new information to his advantage to get the phone back. He grabs at John’s sides with both hands, laughing at the sound it draws from him. John spins around to try to fight off his advances, getting ahold of Gale by his forearms to shove him backwards, but Gale takes him with him. The momentum of both of their weight sends them tumbling off the bed, and now John’s laughing, too- and it’s not just against his will.

The quarterback doesn’t cease in his attempts at tickling him, even though the phone is nowhere to be seen since he’d dropped it at some point during the scuffle. Eventually, John, through his uncontrollable fits of laughter, overpowers the younger boy and pins him.

He’s gasping for air at this point, and so is Gale; chests heaving at having both exerted all their energy. He’d never realized how much smaller Gale is than him until this moment, the size difference more apparent than ever with how he’s towering over and crowding the blond with his body. It slowly dawns on John what a compromising position this is and his laughter starts to die off slowly.

He has a leg snugly pressed against both sides of Gale and he’s holding him down by his wrists. John’s necklace has slipped out from where it’s usually tucked away in his shirt and hangs delicately between them, spinning slowly, and it catches Gale’s attention. John goes to loosen his grip on the football player, expecting him to shove him off of him immediately like he had when John had fallen on him at that party, but Gale instead uses a now free hand to gently reach out between them and touch the gold cross.

“You don’t strike me as the religious type,” Gale tells him, still

sounding breathless from their scuffle as he rubs a thumb over the smooth surface of the decoration curiously.

"I'm not," John says, and how steady his voice is surprises him because he can feel his heart *hammering* in his chest. "It's my dad's. He left me a lot of his jewelry when he passed."

Gale continues to study the intricate details of the pendant, while John studies him.

"It's beautiful."

Their faces are close enough that John can see every flaw that Gale just… doesn't have.

"Yeah," John mumbles lowly in reply. "It is."

Gale's eyelashes flutter as he looks away from the necklace and up at John, and he sees it click for the boy that he hadn't been talking about the jewelry. The color of his cheeks blossom with that lovely hint of red.

It feels like the world has stopped turning- or maybe even existing all together- and all he can hear, feel, and see, is Gale Cleven beneath him. Every inhale and exhale the boy makes fans his face, and he can feel how hot and flushed Gale is through their clothes at all the points where their bodies are touching.

He cautiously raises a free hand, the other still pinning Gale by one of his wrists, up to Gale's lips. He presses the tip of his thumb to the very corner of them, and the boy's mouth falls open almost on command at

the touch.

The fact that Gale hasn't stopped him yet, has only laid there and looked up at him dumbfoundedly, makes him want to test the waters even further. John Egan, after all, has never known how to be offered an inch and not take a mile.

"John?"

The blond's voice, so sweet and innocent sounding in this vulnerable position, rumbles in his chest. He smiles, and watches as Gale's eyes fall to his lips as he does.

"Buck," John murmurs silkily, using the hand he has on Gale's face to tilt the boy's stare back up to meet his own. The blue-eyed boy's pupils are blown wide and the rise then fall of his chest has picked up pace.

John leans ever so slightly forward, unable to help himself, feeling lost in flight again like he had under those bleachers by those sky-colored eyes. He's considering closing the gap between them, he wants to close the gap between them, he's *going* to close the gap between them, and Gale's eyes widen but it doesn't look like he's going to stop him-

And then the door flies open, hitting the wall so loudly that it echoes. A grown man he doesn't recognize comes stumbling in.

It's now that Gale does push John off of him, scrambling to his feet so quickly that he sends John tumbling backwards.

"Dad!" Gale exclaims, and John then also hurries to stand up after

hearing the parental title. He tell that the football player is desperately trying to figure out how to explain away the situation. “It’s not- this isn’t what it looks-“

“Gale, listen,” the large man states, swaying in place, and even from where John is standing a few feet to the side and slightly behind Gale he can smell the alcohol on the father’s breath. “I got a big one, for your next game-“

He sees Gale’s shoulders fall.

“You said that game was the *last one,”* the boy says imploringly, pleadingly.

“I know, I know,” his father tells him, putting his hands on the boys shoulders apologetically. He sees Gale stumble slightly, now trying to keep them both upright. “But I-I just lost a lot of money, and, we’re just down on our luck, you know? I-“

It’s then the intoxicated man seems to realize that him and his son aren’t alone in the room. He freezes, gapes at John, and takes a wobbly step back from them.

“We’ll talk later, okay? This- this will be the last one this time, I swear, Gale.”

And then the door slams shut, leaving the two boys alone again.

Gale stands with his back turned to John, unmoving even after his father had left. His posture is slumped defeatedly.

“Is- is he,” John hesitates, unsure of how to react to what he’d just witnessed. “He’s asking you to point shave again, right?”

The game where he’d put together the pieces felt like forever ago now, and even then he had hoped he was wrong. Gale’s dad had him playing with a very, very dangerous and risky thing here.

He sees Gale raise a hand to his face and rub at his eyes. When he turns around, John can tell he’s fighting off tears.

“He-he has a gamblin’ problem,” Gale sniffles, and the sound ruins John. “It got a lot worse after my ma’ passed, but I-I really thought that last time was it.”

The football player then laughs, but when he meets John’s eyes there’s no humor in them.

“See why I don’t like to bet*?”*

His stomach bottoms out. John suddenly feels like the biggest piece of shit on the fucking planet.

He doesn’t have time to dwell on it though, because he can tell Gale is falling apart at the seams. He takes a step forward to attempt to console the boy, or do *something*, *anything* to help, but Gale takes one back at the same time. The football player suddenly seems very somber, hardening his features.

“Y-you should go,” Gale tries to tell him firmly, but it still comes out

broken.

John shakes his head, assuming that Gale is wanting him to go out of embarrassment for the situation.

“No, it’s okay, I can stay and we can talk about-“

“If I wanna talk to somebody about my family problems I’ll call my damn *girlfriend,* John!”

It feels like all the air has been sucked out of the room at Gale’s nearly shouted words, and it’s suddenly a lot colder than he’d thought it was before.

“Right,” John responds numbly. “Of course.”

He takes his time collecting his things off of the bed, placing them gingerly into his bag, and Gale watches wordlessly.

When he gets to the door, he pauses with a hand on the handle to say one more thing before leaving.

“I’m sorry.”

It’s the first time, he realizes shamefully, that he’s ever said it to him.

He doesn’t specify why, because he has a list of things to be sorry for to Gale Cleven at this point, and Gale doesn’t ask.

-

Chapter End Notes

i've told many of you this but i'm actually growing so attached to writing them in this story i'm going to miss it so bad when i'm done :(

as always, please feel free to come join me on tiktok under the same username @reminiscingromance and obsess over these two all i do is post them at this point lol. i'm mourning, i'll move on eventually (hopefully). i eat up and love seeing you guys on there!! I also sometimes post little peeks of the next chap on the story on there ;)

let me know what you guys thought of this chapter below! your comments are what keep me going they make my day x

Chapter 9: hits different

Chapter Notes

lots of fun character interactions in this chapter, i love all my men from mota and writing them <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-

dreams of your hair and your stare and sense of belief
in the good in the world, you once believed in me
and i felt you and i held you for a while

-

“Yous throw yuh’ phone off tah’ nearest cliff, jackass?”

Curt had ripped his blankets off of him from where they’d been drawn over his head and he throws his hands up in an attempt to shield himself from the blinding rays of sunlight shining into his room that he’d been entirely unprepared for.

“Fuck, Curt,” he responds, wincing, blinking rapidly to try to get his eyes to adjust. “The hell you doing here?”

“Yous hasn’t answered a single damn text of mines since *Friday*.”

John let his head fall back down against his pillow from where he'd raised it in alarm, rubbing at his face. He'd spent the entire weekend crossed out of his mind, but he doesn't need to tell Curt that, he's sure the New Yorker had put that together on his own.

And he *definitely* isn't about to tell Curt he'd gone radio silent because he's been avoiding his phone like the plague so he doesn't do something stupid like text Gale Cleven about the fact that he'd tried to kiss him.

"Awww, Curty," he coos instead, voice rough with sleep still as he pushes himself into an upwards position. "You were worried about little old me?"

"Of course I was," Curt snaps, and the serious tone surprises him. "It's the anniversary of yuh' dad's damn death, for cryin' out loud. Yous had me thinkin' you'd went and done somethin' stupid like- like maybe fuckin' offed yourself, for all I knew."

The two fell into silence as John realized that he had been so caught up in their bet and all things Gale Cleven, the significance of the time of year had gone over his head.

Curt sits down on the mattress next to him, likely taking his lack of response as sadness. And maybe it is. John isn't sure what he's feeling, or if he's feeling anything right now besides a raging hangover.

"We… we don't gotta go tah' school," Curt tells him quietly, causing John to look at the alarm clock on his nightstand and realize his friend had woken him up with just enough time to get ready and maybe make it to first period on time. "We can do whateva', I just didn't want yous tah' be alone."

And while that's a nice thought, John Egan is fine. He's always fine. Again, he *really* wishes people would stop assuming otherwise.

He reaches over and gives his friend's hand a grateful squeeze where it rests next to his on the bed, because while the sentiment is unneeded, he wants Curt to know that it's appreciated. Then, he gets up with a characteristically dramatic flourish that makes the alcohol in his stomach threaten to come up, turning to his friend with a smirk.

"Nonsense, Biddick. It's chicken tendie day in the cafeteria!"

His friend just gives him a small smile in response, and John chooses to ignore the pity and knowingness thinly veiled behind it. He's fine. It's just another day.

"I'll meet you in the car in five, just let me brush my teeth n' shit, okay?"

Curt exits the room to let him to get ready. When John jogs down the stairs after him a few minutes later, he finds a sticky note on the kitchen counter.

Went out with some friends, honey.

I'll be back before you go to bed.

- Love, Mom

John doesn't understand why she still bothers to leave these kinds of notes. He grievously traces the familiar handwriting with the tip of one of his fingers. Nowadays, the way she writes her alphabet is the most he knows about her.

This had been their dynamic for years now: his mom doing a careful dance of avoiding him because he reminded her too much of his dad, while simultaneously trying to not make it obvious that that's what she's doing.

But she'd never needed to tell him, he could see it in her eyes on the rare occasion she graced her only son with her presence. It had gotten worse as he'd matured. When his voice had first dropped, she'd flinch almost every time he spoke to her.

He'd learned to speak to her less.

Just like he'd learned to expect her to be gone all day, and just like how he knew the chances she would be home by the time he fell asleep were slim to none.

He crumples up the piece of paper and throws it in the trash.

-

You'd really think by this point, John would have this whole hangover thing down pat. However, as he's slumped up against the locker next to Curt's donning those obnoxious shades of his again and doing his best to ignore how every voice of the students around them feels like a

fucking mallet to the head, he finds himself regretting a lot of his life choices.

And then he notices Gale with Rosie and an unfamiliar boy just a few yards down the hallway chatting, and he's regretting life in general. The blond laughs at something Rosenthal says; the bright and open expression on his face is a stark contrast from the stony one he'd last seen him with. He can't help but wish he was on the receiving end of that smile, thinking back to how wide it had been when the two had wrestled one another to the floor. Considering the ending of that last encounter, however, he's sure he's one of the last people Gale wants to see right now. That's why he'd skipped their English class today, afterall.

Curt shuts his locker and John's about to promptly lead them in the opposite direction when someone yells out his last name from behind them. He turns to see Rosie beckoning them over with a wave of his hand. Gale stands stiff, intently looking at the ground with a tight hold on the strap of his messenger style bag. He's debating on whether to even go over or not when Curt makes the decision for him.

Rosie greets the two boys by dapping them up while Gale just gives a polite and short nod of acknowledgement. The awkwardness somehow seems to go unnoticed by everyone else as Rosie introduces them all.

"Benny, this is John and Curt. Fellas, this is Benny."

"Pleasure to meet the guys who humble Rosie and Nash's bum asses almost every weekend," Benny says with a sly smile around the gum he's chewing on.

"Oh I *like* dis guy!" Curt crows as Rosie gives his friend a shove for the backhanded comment.

"*Anyways*," the insulted football player continues, "I called you over to invite the two of you to my party tonight."

John raises his eyebrows. He's never been officially invited to a popular kids party before. Him and Curt kind of just show up with alcohol and have always been welcomed with open arms for it. He can tell Curt is thinking the same thing.

"What's tah' occasion?"

"Meatball's turning eight," Rosie states like there's no further context required.

"Meatball as in…" John finally risks a glance over at Gale for the first time since he'd walked over. "Your dog?"

"He's kind of the *team* dog at this point," Benny cuts in and informs them.

Gale, who'd looked caught off guard at John's direct attention at first, cracks a smile and shakes his head at Benny's words.

"Yeah, these bozos have basically made him our mascot," Gale tells him amusedly. "You would've met him Friday, but Benny and Rosie kidnapped him to take him goddamn street racin'."

"He *loves* to go fast," Benny says with defensive enthusiasm.

“He wouldn’t stop *howling*,” Rosie complains at the same time, rubbing an ear like he can still hear it even now. Benny turns to look at him like he’d just insulted his firstborn.

“That’s because he’s part wolf!”

Gale rolls his eyes at the both of them. “That wolf is part dog,” he drawls in a deadpan.

“Yous street race?” Curt asks excitedly, any questions he might’ve had about why a dog is having a birthday party gone at the mention of fast cars.

Rosie gets behind Gale to massage the blond’s shoulders roughly with a grin. “Only when Mother Cleven here lets us get away with it.”

Gale’s face turns red at the nickname. While his friend shakes him for emphasis, he looks up at John from underneath his eyelashes almost shyly. John can’t help but smile at the ruffled boy.

The quarterback, seeming unsure at first, slowly gives him a smile back.

It feels like John’s hangover gets a hell of a lot more bearable at the sight of it.

Rosenthal insisted John and Curt join them for lunch so he could tell them all about his races, and Gale's smile had dropped so fast you'd think someone had pulled a string.

And now here they are, in line at the cafeteria side by side, and he can tell Gale is gripping his lunch tray tensely by the slight white of his knuckles. He's not expecting it when Gale speaks to him quietly under his breath.

"You- you weren't in class today."

John glances over at him in surprise. The blond is overly focused on the runny applesauce he's ladling into a puddle on his tray. He tries to read the football player's expression from his side profile, somehow gauge how he's feeling after Friday's events, but it's purposely closed off.

"I was not," John agrees eventually, resuming putting food onto his own plate. "Why, did you miss me?"

Gale's hold on his tray falters at the question, and a carton of milk tips over the edge and goes tumbling to the ground. John balances his own meal with one hand and catches it with his free one at the last second.

When he goes and gives it back to Gale, their fingers brush ever so slightly and the quarterback's eyes snap up to his. Gale doesn't take it back right away, and John doesn't let go. They stay suspended like that, both holding the drink, for only just a few seconds to everyone else. But to John, it feels much longer. Someone behind them sneezes, a reminder that they're in a line, and Gale pulls his hand with the milk to him so hastily that you'd think John had burned him.

“We just discussed the project a little more in depth,” Gale mutters, quickly fixing the beverage into its previous spot before dipping out of the line early.

When John joins him along with the others at the table, Gale has his arm wrapped around Marge and averts his gaze as John pulls out the chair across from them to settle in next to Curt. He wonders what the cheer captain thinks of John Egan sitting with her during lunch. He battles with the urge to say something snarky when she doesn’t acknowledge him.

How’s that perky little brunette friend of yours, Marjorie?

He bites his lip to hold in a snicker, thinking back to a few weeks ago when the cheerleader had walked in on him screwing said best friend’s brains out at a party. Marge had looked horrified, stomping her dainty foot disparagingly and shouting a name he’d already forgotten. Her distaste for him was clear then, and it was even clearer when she’d given him the most fake *‘nice to meet you’* the other day that he’d ever received- especially considering they’d *already met.*

While his reputation got him to be feared by a lot of the school, it also got him laid. Girls, after all, loved a bad boy; especially good girls like the ones on Marge’s squadron (though they’d only give in when they thought no one would catch them). He’d probably made out with over half of them by now, and fucked a solid quarter.

His gaze and thoughts drift from the cheer captain to the football captain whose arms she’s wrapped up in, and he wonders if the same can be said about good boys.

He’s snapped out of his edging on inappropriate thoughts by Rosie and

Curt pulling him into their conversation. They'd been in the middle of discussing what the school's baseball team was looking like in regards to how they'd perform this upcoming March when he'd sat down.

"You used to play for us, didn't you, Egan?" Rosie chirps at him from next to Marge, curiosity coloring his voice. "Heard you were pretty good, too. Always wondered why you went and quit."

Curt barks out a laugh and gives John a knowing and mirthful look when the former player just shrugs in response to Rosie's inquiry.

"Huglin and Bucky here had… *creative differences*, yous could say."

John stifles a snort at Curt's *very* simplified and watered-down version of things. Gale's own questioning stare is on him now, and he leans back in his chair pompously. The action makes him feel like a goddamn peacock preening to impress a potential mate.

"Otherwise meaning: I very publicly told the Colonel that I wish he'd go home and fuck his poor wife for once so that he'd stop screwing us when the idiot made *another* bad call that lost us *another* game, and he never let me off of the bench again."

There's a chorus of shocked but entertained guffaws from everyone, and Curt chimes in with another important detail.

"Yah' leavin' out tah' part where yous offered to do the deed for him."

Marge chokes on and nearly spits out her sparkling water she'd been sipping, and John can't keep his smirk at bay. Gale has his hand covering his mouth so he can finish chewing through his own

chuckles. The quarterback's eyes twinkle with merriment when they meet his from across the table. If John was in fact a bird, he could only imagine how puffed up he'd have his own chest right now at the accomplishment. Benny, in his spot next to Curt, wipes delighted tears from his eyes before speaking up.

"*Oh* the Colonel is the *perfect* nickname for that uptight bastard. He failed me on my chem test last week."

Rosie, still laughing amusedly, reaches around Marge to playfully smack Gale's arm. "At least our coach is the *goat,* yeah? We're gonna *smoke* the other team at the next game."

Gale clears his throat, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. The change in the quarterback's demeanor is missed by the other guys at the table. Even Marge, his girlfriend, continues on like Gale didn't look like he wanted a hole in the ground to appear and swallow him up.

"*Of course* you guys are," Marge states matter-of-factly, plucking a fry from her tray and placing it between her lips purposefully. She winks at Gale, who gives her a strained smile of agreement back.

It's then John realizes, despite Gale's heated words he'd thrown at him about how he'd call Marge if he wanted to talk about his family issues, that he was the only one at the table that had any idea about what's weighing heavily on the quarterback's mind.

The conversation continues on, Rosie and Benny throwing a few tactics for their upcoming game back and forth, and Gale chiming in half-heartedly only when required. He's been cutting into the same chicken tender for five minutes now, and John's surprised he hasn't sliced clean through the table with how firmly he's gripping the utensils. The jittery bouncing of the blond's leg is starting to make the table vibrate in a way that'll start being noticeable soon to more than

just John himself.

Without thinking, he adjusts his long legs under the table slightly so that his foot comes to rest on top of Gale's and stills the nervous tick. Gale's head shoots up from where he'd been massacring his lunch to find John looking at him with a gentle but intent warning. He can tell the boy hadn't realized he'd been giving himself away with the obvious display of anxiety until John had stopped it.

He watches a mixture of emotions flood Gale's blue orbs as John keeps his foot steady with his own. There's apprehension at first, surprise, and then gratefulness.

Lastly, there's regret.

The remorsefulness settles deep in the blond's irises, and John feels Gale press up back against his shoe with his own. The pressure conveys the apology the quarterback doesn't say out loud.

Neither move to break the hidden contact until the bell rings to signal the end of lunch.

-

Chapter End Notes

the feedback you guys are leaving has literally been blowing my mind, i'm enjoying writing this more than any other fic i've written!

also it being the anniversary of john's dad's death is important for the next chapter! it didn't come into play here, but it will.

let me know what you guys thought of the chapter below, your comments are what keep me inspired! x

Chapter 10: this is me trying

Chapter Notes

essentially a 5k word chapter of realizing feelings <3

also, i don't think i ever outwardly said it, but because john was held back he's almost 18. while gale is still sixteeen, kind of almost 17. there's like a year and a few months of a difference.

another game of beer pong is played, if you aren't familiar with the rules here's one mentioned in the chapter that i'll explain a little:

death cup - refers to any cup that's been sunk but not yet fully consumed. if a player sinks a ball into the unfinished cup, the game is immediately over.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-

they told me all of my cages were mental
so i got wasted like all my potential
and my words shoot to kill when i'm mad
i have a lot of regrets about that

-

He's barely got a foot in the door of Rosie's house later that night when he's knocked on his ass by a ball of fur *torpedoing* straight into his stomach.

It knocks the wind out of him and before he can gain it back there's a tongue enthusiastically lapping at his face. He can hear Bubbles and Curt cackling as he manages to pull back slightly from the loving attack. A dog he can only assuming is Meatball is panting happily at him from his spot now on John's lap.

"Well, how 'bout that," an all-too familiar baritone voice says from in front of him wonderingly. "He remembers you."

He can't ignore the way his heart embarrassingly skips a beat. If you ask John, the quarterback being gifted that velvety and rich of a voice to go with those looks of his is proof that, whatever higher power there is, they *definitely* have favorites.

When he looks up from where he's splat on the ground, Gale is smiling down at him with his arms lazily crossed. He's clad in a green flannel, with a white undershirt and dark jeans that, *fuck*, are almost too skinny for what your typical straight white boy would wear.

John's gawking, he knows he is. He can't help the way his stare dips back down to the boy's pants. The way the denim hugs Gale's athletic thighs…

He forces himself to turn his attention back to the dog contentedly slobbering all over his black t-shirt. The white and grey husky has a party hat that now hangs loosely from his neck, and he fixes it back between two fluffy ears. He racks his brain for some memory of the canine; Meatball must've been a puppy when he'd met him all those years ago.

Back when his mom had still been able to force him to attend therapy, they'd given a name to his forgetfulness. They'd told his mom that he was suffering from severe repression. Which basically meant, in an attempt to cope with losing his dad at such a young age in such a

brutal way, his brain had decided to subconsciously block the difficult emotions, the memories of mourning, and the pain that came with it from those first couple of years after all together. They were still there, the psychiatrist had informed them, but just hidden beneath the surface waiting to burst out.

It's what they said largely cause his explosive behavior and bad habits. It's why he's always picking fights, and why he often likes to lose those fights. The block of emotions leaves him, most of the time, feeling numb. He's been, essentially, going through life half-awake ever since. They told his mom that one day, the dam would break and all of those negative feelings he'd locked away would come back, and then some.

That was six years ago. Nothing had come back besides brief and random flashes. He'd eventually developed the habit of chasing the empty feeling left behind with liquor or some kind of drug he'd take to feel some semblance of warmth. The gaps in his memory never bothered him, anyways; well, most of the time at least. He figured if his brain thought he was better off this way, then it must be for the best.

Or, again, at least most of the time he felt that way.

But right now, looking into the eyes of the brown-eyed husky that belonged to a certain blue-eyed boy, he found himself wishing that the dam would crack just the slightest bit and he'd remember them: just them.

"I wish I could say the same, buddy," he tells the canine quietly, scratching underneath his chin.

When he returns his attention back to Gale, there's something strange swimming in his eyes that he can't recognize. The quarterback clears

his throat, nodding his head to gesture further into the house.

“Rosie told me to tell you he’s waitin’ for that rematch if I ran into you two first.”

“Someone’s eager tah’ lose, eh?” Curt titters, giving John an encouraging pat on the shoulder before abandoning him with Bubbles and Crosby in tow.

Before they disappear into the crowd of people, Crosby looks back from where he’s now behind Gale and the disapproval radiating towards him from his friend is palpable. He swallows the shame that curdles in his throat at the withering look.

Gale, naive to the exchange, calls off Meatball and John gradually picks himself up from off the ground when the dog plants itself obediently at Gale’s side. He stands in place for a second, unmoving and unspeaking, unsure of what to say now that they’re alone for the first time since their almost-kiss.

“I like his hat,” John eventually says simply.

“Benny insisted. The boys even got him a cake,” Gale informs him with an eye roll, but the fond look he gives the husky makes it evident he’s enjoying the night’s shenanigans.

More guests start filing in the door the two are still in the middle of, prompting the teenagers to start in the direction where John’s friends had taken off. Gale isn’t nearly as on edge as he’d seemed in the hallway when Rosie had beckoned him over earlier in the day. Their moment at lunch, whatever it was, appears to have relieved some of the tension between the two.

Or at least it seems to have done so for Gale, who is pleasantly giving John a tour of the need-to–know-house-party-basics (i.e. where the bathroom is for yakking, the backyard for smoking, the kitchen for drinks) as they meander past people, occasionally bumping into each other in the narrow space. John tries to pretend like he's not aware of every single accidental contact.

Back in the cafeteria, Gale had shifted his foot from underneath John's shortly after his warning, but he hadn't moved it far. He'd kept their feet aligned snugly, along with an arm snugly around Marge's shoulders. There was no mistaking it as accidental; the pressure against him was purposeful, it was solid.

Gale's face, however, had seemed to betray nothing. He'd casually continued on picking at his food, continued chatting with his teammates and Curt, and continued to lean into Marge's affection all while John was struggling to focus on literally anything else.

It was really fucking embarrassing, honestly. John Egan: bad boy, player, known for having done everything and anything - and there he was with his head twisted in knots over *shoes touching.*

Then, when lunch had ended and everyone rose from their seats to leave, Gale hadn't spared him a glance before he was whisked away by his girlfriend. And John had been left wondering what the fuck it all meant, and he still hasn't figured it out.

Was Gale just seeking comfort momentarily in John because he was the only one who knew why he was anxious about their next game? Or was there a chance that… Gale had just wanted to be close to him?

Even if so, did *John* himself want that? This had started off as a bet,

after all, hadn't it?

But he'd wanted to kiss Gale- like *really* wanted to. And for a second, it had seemed like Gale was going to let him.

Or he could've just been frozen in shock because a boy was making a move on him, that was also very possible.

Fuck.

John doesn't have a fucking clue which scenario is right, or if any of them even are.

The two boys arrive to the living room where the couches have been moved so that the beer pong table is the center of attention. He's expecting the classic white plastic foldout, but Rosie has what looks like a custom-made beer pong table and it's one of the most glorious things the teenager has ever seen. For a minute, his stressful thoughts roll off of him.

Rosie grins pridefully at John's obvious appreciation. "A beauty, isn't she?"

John whistles lowly in response, running his hands over the finished wood. "You definitely didn't come to fuck around," he agrees with a laugh as he shucks off his jacket onto the sofa behind him.

"No, sir, I did *not*," Rosie taunts gleefully as Nash rubs his hands together in anticipation next to him and narrows in on Curt.

“You’re going *down* this time, Biddick.”

Curt clicks his tongue, shaking his head. “Actually, fellas, I think I messed up my pong hand earlier today doin’… stuff. Anyways, someone’s gonna need tah’ sub for me tonight.”

John turns to his friend incredulously because they are *always* pong partners, what does he mean a *sub*, and what *stuff*? His hand had been fine when they walked in! He’s about to tell him to suck it the fuck up, when he realizes who Curt had been looking at when he’d said he needed a sub.

He’s looking directly at Gale Cleven, and Gale is looking back like a deer caught in headlights.

“I-I don’t drink,” the blond protests, but Curt is already tossing him the ball he’d had in his hands.

“No worries! Bucky here will happily drink for the both of ya’, won’t yous, John?” Curt is smiling at him like the cat that got the cream, and John bites his tongue to keep choice words from coming out. “Besides, aren’t yah’ our star quarterback? You should be *great* with handlin’ balls!”

John is going to kill Curt. He’s going to physically maim, strangle, and-

“Okay.”

And suddenly Gale is rolling the sleeves of his flannel up and moving to stand next to John opposite of Rosie and Nash. Rosenthal looks

absolutely thrilled with the change of events.

“Alright, Cleven, this is for nailing me in the head at practice last week!”

Gale breaks out into a smile at this and chuckles. “You walked in front of the damn ball, Rosie, I didn’t nail you with shit.”

John is still processing the fact that Curt had winged-man this into existence while also trying to figure out if he’s happy about it or not. But then Gale turns to him, and while he’d seemed unwilling earlier, there’s a mischievous glint in his blue eyes as he looks up at John now.

“The dream team, right?” Gale says to him, palming the ping pong ball in his hands.

John can’t help the smirk that pulls at his lips at the familiar phrase he’d said to the football player under the bleachers about being partnered up for English. The interaction felt like a lifetime ago, despite having been just last week.

“Don’t worry, Buck, I’m not counting on it.”

Gale shoves him with his forearm for the teasing insult that’s a twist on his own words, and probably for the nickname as well, and next thing he knows they’re watching Nash sink his first shot and Rosie miss entirely.

“Is the goal of the game to overshoot the table completely?” Gale asks with faux innocence, and John could’ve spit out the drink he’d had to

take for Nash scoring at the blond's mocking words.

He didn't expect Gale to talk shit, especially off the bat. He's definitely not the only one, either. Curt chokes on a laugh, and Bubble's hits Crosby's arm in a gesture that says oh snap!

"I didn't know you were a comedian, Gale," Rosie responds dryly. He gestures for them to take their turn. "Let's see it then, hotshot."

Gale tisks, rolling his shoulders. As far as anyone at the table is aware, Gale's never played the alcohol-driven game. He brings his arm back, and John can tell by the slightly awkward way he throws it that he's not quite sure what he's doing.

Nonetheless, he makes it. The ball spins around the rim of the first cup for a second, before then tipping over to land in the cup next to it. John turns to the quarterback like he's the eighth wonder of the world as their friends go crazy.

"Is there anything you're not good at?" He asks in disbelief. In what might've been his first shot ever, the boy had made two points.

And then Gale Cleven, the little shit, fucking *winks at him*.

The game goes on, and while they'd started off strong, their so-called dream team ends up with three cups left while their opponents have just one.

"Don't miss," Gale warns, looking focused as he braces himself against the table.

If John misses, that would essentially be game. Rosie and Nash would both have to miss their next shots for them to have a chance at winning, and usually only one missed each turn.

"I never do," he tells the quarterback cheekily, prompting the blond to roll his eyes at him because that is *very* untrue. John has missed more shots than Gale has this game, but that wouldn't stop him from being his cocky self.

Now, John knew they could do the strategic thing and call triangle to make the cups into an easy pyramid, but they'd very possibly still lose. John, about to take his shot, suddenly notices that Rosie hasn't fully drank the contents of the cup Gale had made on their last turn. It sits off to the side slightly, forgotten as Nash and Rosie gloat to one another about their likelihood to win. John makes a split-second judgement call without consulting his teammate.

"Death cup," he shouts, and goes for the unfinished drink. The look of horror on Rosenthal's face, him realizing his mistake, is comical as the ball sails through the air. Nash falls to the floor in a dramatic display of defeat when he sinks it.

Gale turns to him with an astounded cheer, beaming, and John grabs him victoriously by the shoulders. While he jostles the younger boy in his enthusiasm, jumping up and down foolishly, the quarterback's hands fall to John's hips to steady himself. Gale's wide ear-to-ear smile matches his own, and John realizes that despite not consuming nearly enough alcohol to be drunk… he feels alive.

He'd felt more alive these last few days when he'd been spending time with Gale Cleven than he has in a very, very long time. Even just back when they'd first met in detention and bantered, something about the quarterback's presence had stoked a fire in him - it woke him up. The sudden awareness of this stills him.

Gale must sense something's off, his own smile faltering as John's had dropped. His hands are still on Gale's shoulders, and Gale's are still on his waist. Whatever the younger boy sees in John's eyes, it makes him recoil. He abruptly takes a step back to turn to their friends and John's hands fall to his sides.

"This was fun, boys, but I-" Gale pauses, looks back over at John hesitantly but so briefly you'd have to be paying attention to catch it, "I probably should go find Marge now."

"Yeah, yeah," Rosie replies mournfully, removing his hands from his hair from where he'd been pulling at it in disappointment. "Run away, Cleven, you just know you couldn't pull this off twice."

Gale chuckles at his teammate's pettiness, patting the other football player's arm good-naturedly as he passes him. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, pal."

Curt slides up next to him to watch Gale leave. "You're welcome," the New Yorker states smugly, throwing an arm around his shoulders. John is quick to shrug it off and smack him upside his head.

"'*You should be great at handlin' balls,'* really?!"

Curt giggles, a little tipsy and obviously happy with himself for the quip. "Hey! Yah' should be grateful! I'm helpin' yous against my betta' interest here!"

"Thanks," he says, his voice dripping with insincerity.

Curt, unfazed by his lack of appreciation, slings his arm back around the taller man and nods in the direction Gale had headed. “Hate to be the bearer of bad news, though, but I don’t think that straw bends - even for yous.”

John follows Curt’s stare. In the crowd of people the next room over, Marge is trying to get Gale to dance with her. It’s obvious in his body language that the quarterback is reluctant, but eventually Marge says something that gets a smile out of him and wins him over. John watches as Gale spins her around before pulling her into a chaste kiss.

“What should I spend my 50$ on?” Curt wonders out loud, and John is suddenly painfully aware of how sober he is right now.

“I need a fucking drink.”

“Did I hear shots?” Benny calls out, materializing out of seemingly nowhere with an entire bottle of tequila.

-

John is sprawled on a couch, well and thoroughly on his way to being sloshed, when Curt introduces him to what will be their newest addition to the baseball team come March: Kenneth Lemmons. The curly-haired brunet tells him to call him Kenny. Curt had mentioned him before and spoken excitedly about his potential.

“So you’re a sophomore,” John states impressed when Kenny sits down next to him. They didn’t have anyone below a junior on the

team currently. “You must be good.”

“He’s a baby,” Curt answers for the boy from his spot across from them with a teasing smirk, “but yeah, he’s alright.”

“I’m *sixteen* now!” Kenny says back defensively, glancing over at John like he’s checking to make sure he’d heard. The teenager then smiles over the rim of his drink coyly at him. “And I can only hope to be as good as you were.”

The flattery and pointedly stating that he’s above the age of consent don’t go over John’s head. And usually, since John is going to be eighteen next month, he wouldn’t ever normally go for a sophomore. But he’s drunk, the boy is very obviously into him, and his eyes are *almost* the right shade of blue that John would prefer to be looking into right now. He downs the rest of his drink in one go and puts his arm on the back of the couch where Kenny is sitting.

“Is that so?”

-

John and Kenny had hit it off decently well, as they have baseball in common. He lets John go on a drunken info-dump about the Yankees for a while, but eventually John can tell the boy is zoning out.

He tries not to think about how intently Gale had listened to him as they’d laid across the school’s bleachers, arms crossed in his letterman jacket under his chin, and had asked questions that encouraged him to

go on longer and into more detail.

And Gale doesn't even like sports.

He goes to take a swig from his cup to rid himself of the memory, but finds that it's empty. He's about to pull out his flask from his pocket when Kenny all but jumps to his feet to offer to get him another drink. The over-eagerness is honestly a turnoff, but then out of his peripheral he catches a glimpse of his preferred blue-eyed company.

Gale is still with Marge, but the two have moved to stand off to the side of the drink table. The cheer captain is chattering on about something, oblivious to the way football captain isn't paying attention to her.

Because Gale is occupied with trying to burn a *hole* into Kenny's head.

His mouth is pressed into a thin displeased line, and John recognizes the unmistakable look of jealousy before Gale can wipe his face of it and try to tune back into his conversation with Marge when he notices John's caught him staring.

It sends a thrill up John's spine. *Gotcha*, he thinks.

Kenny gets to the table to fetch John more alcohol, and John watches as Gale excuses himself from his girlfriend and approaches the sophomore. John's much too far away to hear what the quarterback says as he leans close to whisper something into Kenny's ear, but whatever it is has the kid blanching, eyes wide, and taking off with his tail between his legs.

And John goes from thrilled to pissed.

Because Gale is obviously confused with some sort of internal gay-panic going on, John knows that now, but that doesn't give the football player the right to scare off or have any control over who John mingles with when the guy has a *fucking girlfriend.*

(The pot is definitely calling the kettle black right now, as John has made a literal bet on who Gale would mingle with, but John's too drunk to put that together or think that deeply.)

Curt chooses then to come back from wherever he'd fucked off to, John can't recall him leaving at this point or why he had, and is puzzled by his new teammate's absence. He asks John where the other boy had gone, and when John doesn't answer him his confusion turns into concern.

"Hey, Bucky, yous okay?"

Is he okay? He can't tell right now. He's upset, he's more upset than he should be he thinks. Or maybe not upset enough about the right things. The room suddenly feels unbearably stuffy, and Gale has disappeared with the cheer captain once again.

"Let's get yous some air, Bucky, come on, up."

John allows Curt to drag him onto his feet from the couch and the two stumble together to the back patio. His friend releases him once they're outside, not expecting John to almost immediately trip over himself and land on his knees in the dirt of the yard. It's empty except for them, the worsening cold of November keeping most people inside.

“Jesus, Bucky, we only been here two hours.”

John honestly hadn’t realized how wasted he was until they’d begun walking. Either way, his friend becomes background noise, because a few feet from where John had landed in the grass lies a discarded baseball mitt. John reaches out, hypnotized by the object. He flips it over in his hands, feeling the familiar grooves. He should feel something about this right now, shouldn’t he? It’s the anniversary of his dad’s death, and he’s holding one of their favorite pastimes in his hand. There’s the familiar itch under his skin of things long locked away trying to claw their way out. He feels nothing but the quiet rage he’s always carried.

The most he’s felt of something more had been with a boy inside who he couldn’t even have.

He aggressively throws the baseball glove across the yard, startling Curt.

“What the hell, Bucky-“

“Do you feel anything Curt?” John asks his friend, pushing himself onto his feet suddenly. Curt takes a step back when John takes a step forward. “Because *me*, well, half the time, I don’t feel a damn *thing*.”

His friend doesn’t answer the question. Instead, he’s watching John with wide, unsure eyes, because John Egan doesn’t *do* this. John Egan doesn’t talk about his feelings, or a lack thereof.

John Egan is always fine.

“And when I do feel something I’m just- I’m just so angry, Curt. I’m so angry all the time, because it’s all I have anymore and it’s *easy*. And being angry is better than- it’s better than nothing. I just want to feel- I want-“

He pauses, running a hand through his hair haggardly. He yanks on it, and the sting is a familiar and anchoring feeling. There’s something knocking at the closed door in his head, trying to make itself known again, wanting to be felt again. But the door stays shut, and he can feel his anger dissipating like the fog off of some awful lake. Left behind will be nothing but the stillness and emptiness of open water.

“Can you do me a favor?” He asks his friend as the numbness settles back in.

Curt rubs at the back of his head and gives a quiet reply of yes, and John can tell that he’s making him nervous. He almost feels bad, but he’s not really feeling anything right now.

“I want you to hit me, okay? Square on the nose.”

Curt looks at him like he’s insane, and maybe he is. “I-I’m not gonna *hit* yah’, Bucky.”

“Oh come on, don’t give me that! You’re from New York, right?” John says challengingly as he crowds into his smaller friend’s space. “You’re gonna tell me you can’t fight? Been all talk this whole time?”

Curt’s jaw is set and John can tell he’s getting under his skin. He gives his friend a firm shove this time, rambling off more bullshit to try to goad him into fulfilling his request. On the second shove, he sees

Curt's arm wind back.

The pain explodes across his face in a delightful wave of blinding whiteness. John reels back, falling flat on his ass. He's laughing as he holds both hands to his nose to stop the blood flowing from it. He can hear Curt spewing apologies, and it takes him a minute through the throbbing to realize that it's not John that he's apologizing to.

"He- he asked me tuh', I swear, okay? I don't know if it's because it's tuh' day his dad-"

"I know what day it is," a gruff voice snaps. There's suddenly someone kneeling in front of him, tentative hands pulling at his, trying to survey the damage, and once he blinks through the sting of the punch he's met with a worried pair of sky-blue eyes.

"Hey, you," John coos with a smile, feeling invigorated by the pounding of his head and at the sight of the quarterback. He can taste the copper of blood between his teeth as he speaks.

"Hi," Gale replies, but his tone doesn't share his elated mood. Having removed John's fingers from clutching at his nose, the quarterback moves his own to cup John's cheeks and tilt his head side to side. "I don't think you broke it," the blond tells Curt grimly and he hears his friend sigh in relief.

The careful and gentle way Gale is observing his injury takes him back to their night in the bathroom, and he brings one of his hands to cover one of the younger boy's that are holding his face. "You're always rescuing me, Buck," he murmurs, still considerably intoxicated.

But the liquor helping the words flow more freely doesn't make them any less true. Gale did seem to always be saving him: as kids, at that

first party, from Chick, and now from himself.

The statement had pulled a soft but sad smile from Gale, who brings his free hand to brush over the small scar forming above John's eyebrows from where he'd hit his head on the ceiling fan. "You have a bad habit of needin' to be rescued," the football player sighs, but there's a fondness to it.

"Like a damn damsel in distress," John agrees with a self-depreciating laugh. *Fuck,* he's such mess. He removes his hand off of Gale's to wrestle his flask from out of his back pocket, but Gale snags it gingerly before he can bring it to his lips.

"I think you've had enough to drink, John."

John feels the anger from earlier flare up at Gale trying to control him again. "Is that what you told Lemmons when you chased him off earlier?" He replies with venom in his voice.

There's a challenge in his statement, in his stare as he bores into the blond's with accusations, but Gale doesn't rise to it. His eyes simply drop to look at the ground and he clears his throat; but he can't clear away what John had seen in him earlier.

"Let's get you home, okay?"

"No!" He shouts abruptly, a hand flying to grip Gale by his forearm to keep him from standing up. He doesn't want to be alone in that house that was even emptier than him. Not tonight. "No, just- I'm sorry. Just don't make me go home, Gale, please."

The use of his real name is a clear shock to Gale's system. He searches John's eyes, eventually reaching to carefully pry his fingers that gripped him tightly by his jacket off, not letting them go right away.

"Okay, you're okay," the football player tells him like one would sooth a wild animal. He turns to look at Curt over his shoulder. "I'm gonna take him to get some food in his stomach I think."

There's no reply, that he can hear at least, from Curt as Gale is once again hauling his heavier frame up and helping him walk in a drunken state. He hears the words Crosby had told him echo in his head as he leaves his closest friend behind in the dimly lit backyard with a bloodied hand to go with the angel of a boy whose feelings he'd made a game of, and they make him want to vomit.

'I get that you're fucked up… but that doesn't mean you get to go around fucking other people up for fun.'

-

Chapter End Notes

firstly i want to apologize for the delay, i missed the last two update days because i was so stuck on this chapter. i had two ways this story was going to go, and i could not figure out which one for the longest time!

i hope you guys enjoy this chapter, if i ever take longer than usual it's just because i care so much about this story and i genuinely love writing it and the characters and don't want to put out anything i'm not fully happy with <3

as always, let me know your thoughts in the comments! i always

like to hear what your hopes are/opinions are :)

(also if you haven't, check out the lovely fan art added at the end of chapter 5 drawn by @zyabmn861 on TikTok)

Chapter 11: i almost do

Chapter Notes

it’s 5am here but here’s chapter 11, folks !

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-

and i wish i could run to you
and i hope you know that every time i don't
i almost do
i almost do

-

They’re in Gale’s car for a grand total of 5 minutes before John is telling him to pull over so he can throw up.

“Wait- seriously?” Gale questions from his place behind the wheel, and John just gives him a look because *why the fuck would he lie about that,* and the football player promptly pulls into the nearest parking lot.

John throws open the door the second Gale starts to slow down, not even waiting for him to put it into park, and stumbles across the pavement to start heaving into the bushes of a McDonald's. He vaguely hears Gale’s door open then shut and the sound of the boy’s shoes crunching the gravel behind him.

“Still think you needed that last drink?”

John, still in his bent over position emptying the contents of his stomach, makes sure to classily give Gale the middle finger without sparing him a glance.

He jumps at the unexpected touch to his back.

Gale pauses, seeming unsure of himself, before starting to drag his hand in slow, soothing circles over John’s jacket. John leans into the comforting motion as he continues to be sick. His stomach muscles are sore from all the contracting by the time he’s done.

“Do you think you could keep any food down?” Gale asks John once he’s standing up straight, and he can hear concern still laced in the quarterback’s voice.

But having exhumed most of the excess alcohol from his body, John feels like a new man; and he’s a *starving* new man. Those two golden arches hanging over the parking lot look like the gates of heaven to him right now.

“Puke and rally, Buck,” John tells him with a hearty clap to the shoulder as he swaggers past him like he hadn’t just been spewing his guts out not even a minute prior. It’s a few seconds before Gale moves to follow him to the car, likely a little taken back by John’s sudden and miraculous recovery. When Gale slides hesitantly back in next to him, he turns to give the blond a pleading look. “*Please* pull into the drive-thru, I actually think I would kill someone for a Big Mac right now.”

Gale blinks, processing, then he huffs out a laugh and puts the car into gear. “No killin’ necessary, John.”

The football player is the one who gives the worker their order, and as he's about to wrap it up John sees something advertised on the building that makes him lean over Gale to shout out an obnoxious last-second request.

"And a happy meal toy, please! We'll pay extra."

"You're a *child,"* Gale states once he's finished, pushing John from where he'd basically thrown himself across his lap to reach the speaker back to his own seat.

"You're just jealous that I'm getting a unicorn bobblehead and you're not," John informs him with a self-satisfied grin as they pull up to the first window.

"I'm crushed, honestly."

"As you should be. They're the best extinct animal."

The last part makes Gale stare blankly at him like he's not quite sure if he's pulling his leg or not, but before John can elaborate (he wasn't going to anyways) the worker is asking for their form of payment.

-

John had assumed Gale would take him straight home now that he'd sobered up, but to his surprise the quarterback instead drives past both of their houses to park at the playground at the end of their street. He turns to look at Gale with questions, but the teenager is already getting out of the vehicle with both of their drinks in his hands. John follows him with their bag of food.

"This is… romantic," John says slowly, half a joke and half not, as Gale had led them over to an empty swing set. He suddenly feels like he's right in the middle of some stupid coming-of-age film.

"You said you didn't wanna go home, didn't you?"

He can't see Gale's full expression as the younger boy settles into one of the swings. He has his head ducked down, but John can still make out the intense pink dusting his cheeks even in just the moonlight. Gale is *embarrassed* right now, John realizes. And it's *cute as fuck.*

John doesn't reply, not trusting himself to speak as he sits down in the other swing. Here the football player is, trying to make him feel better, and he goes and makes fun of him. Classic John Egan: everything's a joke, and if it wasn't one already, he'd make it one.

"Besides, uh, I thought it would maybe be nice to- I mean, your dad… Well, you guys-"

John does speak now, cutting Gale off as he struggles to find an elegant way to say: *you and your dead dad that you were having a breakdown about on the anniversary of his death used to play ball here.*

"Yeah," he replies, briefly looking around at their familiar surroundings before roughly yanking open the brown paper bag in his hands. "Real nice."

The memories of his dad himself, such as their moments at this park, well, he still has those for the most part. They aren't prominent, he has to think hard to recall them hence why he hadn't connected the dots for why Gale had taken them here right away, but they're there. The closer it got to his death, however, the blurrier the memory would be until there was none at all: not of where he'd been when he found out, how he'd found out, or what it had felt like.

"Or I'm an idiot," Gale suddenly spouts, finishing his previous sentence with newfound anxiety at John's negative reaction, "and the last place you'd want to be is here, considerin' you didn't even want to be at your house why would I think-"

"It's fine," John snaps, interrupting the boy again, and immediately feels guilty at the way his face falls. He isn't angry with Gale for this, he knows that the blond had meant well, but when it comes to his dad anger is his wired-in reaction. *Stupid fucking repression.* He takes a deep breath through his nose, finding and brandishing Gale's chicken nuggets to him as a peace offering. "It's fine, Buck. It's a nice thought. Thank you."

Gale's eyes are still contrite as he carefully accepts the food and gives John his Diet Pepsi in return. Their fingers brush briefly at the exchange, but for once neither of them jump at the contact. The two teenagers eventually lapse into as comfortable of a silence as the circumstances allow while they start to eat.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" Gale asks quietly after a few minutes, because of fucking course the white knight wouldn't drop it. John feels that familiar brewing of his temper, and then Gale keeps going like John hadn't already gathered what he'd meant. "About your dad?"

"Do you want to talk about *yours*?" John retorts spitefully, unable to

reel the rage back this time.

Gale doesn't reply right away, and when John regards him warily out of the corner of his eye he sees that the quarterback has that same look of regret on his face as he'd had in the cafeteria earlier that day. Once again, the fury melts away, and John tries not to think about how the football player breaking down his walls was becoming a trend.

"You're the only one who knows about that," Gale tells him meekly, glancing up from where he'd been nervously folding the corners of his burger's wrapper. His eyes are profound despite how small he seemed to be making himself on the swing, and there's a message there that John can't decipher. He thinks that maybe he's not supposed to yet.

"It's not just you I don't remember from that summer," he finds himself expressing with a more earnest tone than he thought he was capable of. Surprise flashes across Gale's face at John's words, and he'd be lying if he tried to say he himself isn't also taken back by the fact that he's opening up like this willingly as well. "I-I don't remember that summer in general, or the one after that. I have repression issues from trauma, or whatever. It gets to me sometimes."

Gale is watching him carefully with that piercing, calm look that is usually a signature of his again. John, as much as he likes to poke holes in the guy's cool exterior, also found it comforting at times. Gale Cleven is level-headed and steady where John Egan is all over the place and teetering on the brink. Gale's presence brings him a sense of balance and comfort he hasn't known before. It scares him, because it makes him want to bare his soul so that the younger boy could soothe all the jagged edges.

He lets out a sad, disbelieving laugh. He finds himself looking at his hands instead of the intently listening and understanding blue eyes of Gale. "You know I haven't cried since I was 10?"

He feels Gale studying the side of his face. “Do you want to cry?”

John digs the toe of his shoe into the sand with purpose. The bag of food in his hand is dangling loosely and forgotten. “All the time,” he whispers, like he’s afraid of who might hear.

John Egan is supposed to always be fine.

A hand comes to gently rest on his where he’s tightly gripping one of the chain’s of the swing with his free hand. He stares at the arm, unable to bring himself to meet the football players gaze at first after being so painfully honest in a way he’s not used to.

“Daddy issues, huh?” Gale pipes up with eventually, catching on to John’s conflicting thoughts. The hand on top of his squeezes down for only a brief moment before letting go, but the reassurance behind the gesture is clear. “Gotta love ‘em.”

John brings his head up to give the quarterback a grateful smile at the familiar words of comfort he himself had bestowed upon the football player when he’d first mistakingly opened up about his dad’s problems. A breeze billows past them to sway their swings ever so slightly and the air is crisp, the sky is clear and full of stars, and the moment feels so peaceful that John thinks he *could* cry. The wind, however, causes Gale to shiver noticeably, and John becomes acutely aware of the fact that Gale doesn’t have a coat on in nearly *December*. And it was a warmer night than usual for this time of year, sure, but it’s still cold as shit to not be wearing a coat of some kind.

“You’re cold,” he remarks, snapping himself out of his rare emotional state. “You don’t have a jacket in your car?”

Gale suddenly looks uncomfortable. “I-I gave it to Marge earlier.”

John feels the jealousy curl around his organs like vines. “What a gentleman.”

Gale looks confused as John goes to stand up. He starts to take off his jacket, and Gale is protesting immediately once he realizes his intentions.

“Then *you're* going to be cold.”

“I don’t get cold,” he tells the blond simply, coming around behind him to drape the garment over his shoulders. He takes his time in settling it snugly around the younger boy who doesn’t move a muscle during the process. He can’t see Gale roll his eyes once he releases him, but it’s evident in his tone.

There’s unmistakable affection there, too

“Everyone gets cold, dumbass.”

“Everyone except the Great John Egan.”

“The same Great John Egan that was puking in the McDonald’s bushes an hour ago?”

“Hey, I didn’t get any on the jacket!” He crows defensively, going to sit back down on his swing. Gale gives him a look that says *and?* “Oh, just be grateful and shut up, you dick.”

“I’m just grateful it’s not that awful sheepskin you used to wear all the time in middle school,” Gale groans unexpectedly, reaching up to cover his face with his hands like the mere memory of the piece of fabric is painful to him. “God, it was *so ugly*.”

John stares at him, mouth agape. “Are you seriously insulting my taste in fashion while wearing my jacket right now?”

Gale turns to him like *he’s* the one that should be insulted, not John. “I had to look at that monstrosity *every day* durin’ first period!”

“I *loved* that jacket,” John cries defensively, not believing his ears. That jacket was *cool!* In fact, he’d loved it so much that it was still in the back of his closet somewhere after all these years. “I only stopped wearing it because it got too small!”

Gale huffs. “Well thank god for small miracles. I would’ve burned it if the opportunity had presented itself.”

A laugh bellows out of John now. He shakes his head, biting his lip to keep from smiling like an idiot. “I didn’t even know we had any classes together in middle school.”

Gale hums, drumming his lithe fingers on his pop as he takes a sip. “We had first and fourth together in 7th grade, but only lunch together in 8th,” the football player informs him nonchalantly while continuing to eat their now-cold food. “None in 9th, but last year we had algebra together. I think you showed up *maybe* four times.”

The quarterback looks up at him with a teasing smile after the last part, but it quickly fades at the stunned look on John’s face. He sees

Gale slowly realize that it isn't exactly normal for him to remember all of this so specifically and easily about someone he'd barely spoken to for years up until recently.

Gale had been right; John had barely showed up to his classes in 10th grade. He'd almost been held back again like they'd done the year his dad died because of how far he fell behind. But before 10th grade, when his substance abuse had been at its peak, he'd had a decently steady attendance record. He scowers his head for any memory of the blond in class or during a lunch period before now, but he comes up empty handed. It's shocking to him, repression issues aside, that he'd somehow overlooked him all that time.

Because Gale Cleven, lately, is all he can look at or focus on when the two are in the same room.

"How-" John clears his throat. The question was choking him with its weight. Gale was watching him with wide eyes that seem to be pleading with John for something. He has no idea what. "Why do you remember all of that?"

Gale pulls away, both with his eyes and his body, hunching in on himself. The inner battle the quarterback is having is palpable. John regrets pushing, he's going to push Gale away like this, but then suddenly Gale brings his face up to speak almost amusedly; like he thinks it's funny.

"Same reason I scared off Lemmons, I suppose."

John sucks in a breath at the confession. It's more than he thought Gale would maybe ever be able to admit to himself, even if he didn't say it outright. Even if he laughed. It leaves John speechless for a moment.

“Yeah?” He replies weakly, suddenly feeling sick again. *He doesn’t know,* John thinks to himself frantically.

He doesn’t know. Would he tell me that if he knew?

And then John’s stomach is full-blown *turning*, because Gale’s face is getting closer. Blue eyes are searching his with doubt but also hopefulness, and he’s frozen in place. He wants incredibly badly to surge forward and erase that doubt, but he can’t bring himself to do the selfish thing for once.

Instead, he almost flinches.

Because here sat this boy, this *beautiful* boy, so kind, so caring, so trusting right now of a guy that had been toying with him and seeing him as something to wager on.

And this poor boy is trying to kiss him.

He is *such a piece of shit.*

John turns at the last minute and Gale’s lips brush his cheek. The quarterback pulls back immediately, face flushing with embarrassment and regret.

“Oh, wow, I’m sorry,” the blond stutters, going to stand up. John fights back the urge to reach for him. “I’m so dumb, I thought- I don’t know what I thought.”

“Gale, wait-“ He tries to say, but the boy had already begun to walk away. He doesn’t stop him, because what could he say? Could he tell him? *Should* he? Gale hadn’t thought wrong at all, but he’d likely not care anymore if he told him about the bet. He’s the first person Gale had ever opened up to about his dad’s gambling problem, for Christ's sake, and he’d went and *bet on him.*

He hears the sound of a car starting, and then he’s watching Gale pull away to his house at the end of the street. He lives right next to the park, just a stones throw away, but he doesn’t get up to head there for a small eternity.

Instead he watches the swing where Gale had risen from so swiftly sway back and forth until it comes to a gentle stop.

-

Chapter End Notes

i’m so sorry i’m not sticking to the posting schedule, i’ve never had one before and i’ve realized putting a time constraint really dims my creativity and love i have to pour into this story! i’ll still update weekly, multiple times if i can, don’t worry :)

let me know what you think below! your comments make my day <3

Chapter 12: down bad

Chapter Notes

> the contact picture is an actual picture of barry and callum together! i just de-aged them in photoshop and tweaked it a bit. and john called him ‘curty’ in like chapter 6 i think? and john and his dumb nicknames ya know. it’s a thing now. they’d do some dumb gay shit like that and put a heart at the end of his name. curt probably took john’s phone and put the heart there himself tbh.
>
> lockscreen is a pic of the yankees stadium, John’s fav baseball team in MOTA. can be assumed he took the pic himself, maybe even when he went with his dad once before he passed. won’t address it in the story so thought i’d throw it here!

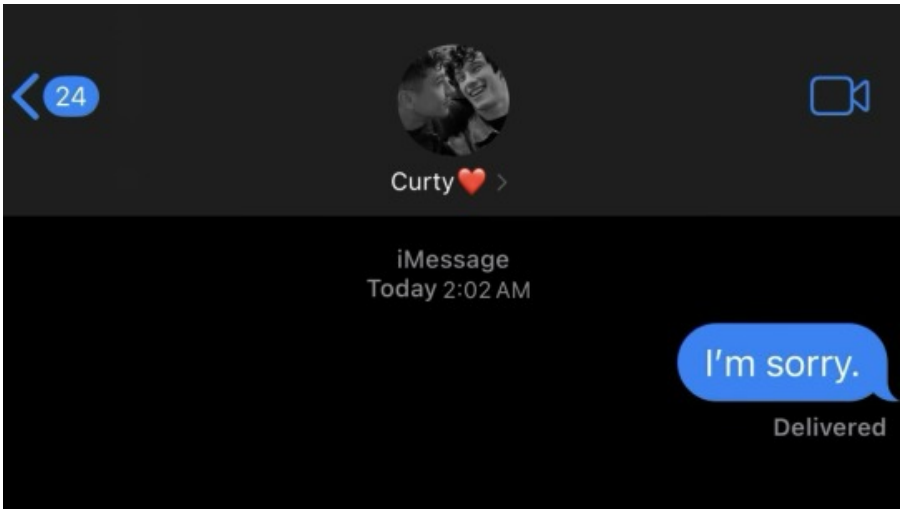
See the end of the chapter for more notes

-

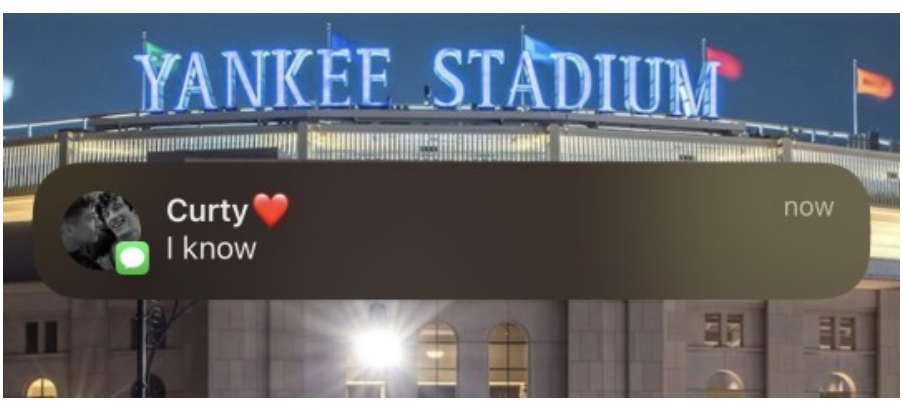
now i’m down bad crying at the gym
everything comes out teenage petulance
"what if i can't have him"
"i might just die, it would make no difference."

-

John tosses and turns that night, restless, repeatedly flickering his phone’s screen on to send a message to Gale only to turn it off before even typing a single letter because what the fuck is he supposed to say? It’s two in the morning when he finally sends a short text, but it’s not to Gale.

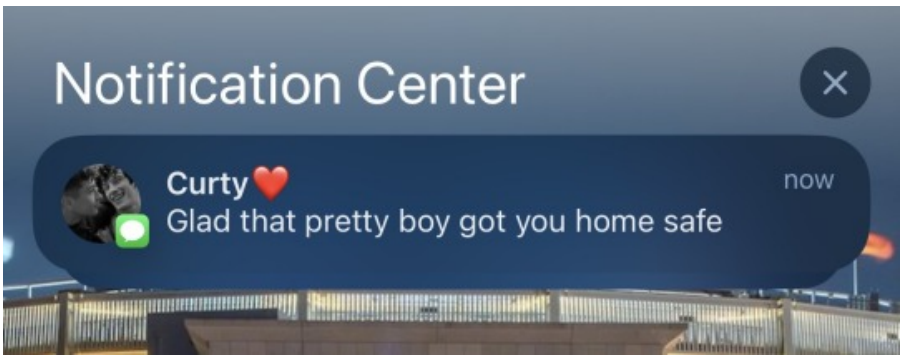


It's only a few seconds before the bottom of the text says 'read,' but no bubbles appears to let John know that Curt is typing. He checks his friend's location that he always has shared with him while waiting, and is relieved to see that Curt is still at the party. At least one of their nights hadn't been entirely ruined because of him. He swipes out of the app and turns off his phone, assuming the New Yorker isn't going to reply to him for now. John wouldn't blame him if he didn't, Curt has been dealing with his episodes for years but he'd crossed a line tonight. To his surprise, though, his lockscreen lights up with a notification after a few minutes.



The response is short, and anyone who isn't wise to John and Curt's

dynamic would probably think it a shitty one. But to John, the text conveys the understanding and lack of judgement his friend has always graced him with despite his many flaws and mistakes. He's smiling to himself, feeling incredibly grateful with how Curt Biddick has put up with him for so long, when he gets a follow up to the message.



The nickname for their school's football captain has his smile deepening at first, because it's what John had called him in detention before he'd gotten to know him and boy is Gale sure pretty, but then wipes it completely when he remembers the current situation at hand. He debates telling Curt now that the bet is off, that it was a stupid fucking idea to begin with, but he doesn't want it to overshadow his apology.

He'll tell Curt when he sees him at school tomorrow.

For now, he hearts the two messages, scrolls to stare at Gale's contact one more time, and then turns off his bedside lamp and goes to bed.

-

John wakes up late as *fuck* the next morning, his mind having been too preoccupied to remember to set an alarm. He throws himself out of bed and yanks on (mostly) clean clothes that had been on his floor that he can only hope look somewhat decent together because he's in too much of a rush to double check. If he's quick enough, he'll be able to make it to his and Gale's shared third period. He *really* doesn't want the quarterback to wrongly assume that John is avoiding him if he doesn't show up.

He bustles into the classroom, curls untamed and looking disheveled, to be met with the unhappy sight of the school's cheer captain draped over Gale. He's surprised, and he feels stupid for it. What had he expected to change because of last night, really? He doesn't even really know what last night *was*.

It feels almost kind of relieving, though, that he isn't the only one being a shitty person in this situation. John Egan might be a gambler and a manipulator, but Gale Cleven, as of right now, is kind of a *cheater*. But it's not relieving at all, because John feels partially responsible for that as well. After all, he'd made the bet that he could get Gale to cheat with him.

'I wanted to see the king get his hands dirty,' he'd told the blond when he'd asked why John had wanted him to come with him last week. He remembers the way Gale had shut down so quickly after the comment.

He's almost gotten what he'd wanted, and he hates himself for it.

Gale hadn't looked his way despite having definitely noticed his entrance judging by the way the lines of his body have gotten taught. He decides he might as well use the move that had started this all, and he plants himself in the empty desk right behind Gale. He doesn't chance a look into the corner where he usually sits; he can only imagine how much Crosby is fuming right now. As soon as he tracks

down Curt and calls the bet off, he'd tell Crosby too. But right now, his focus is Gale.

The blond doesn't turned around, but Marge eyes him suspiciously like he's a fox that's been getting a little too close to her chicken coop for her comfort. She scooches forward on the desktop she's sitting on to get closer to her boyfriend, hooking a leg around his, and he can't even be mad at the cheerleader for being wary of him. But little did Marjorie know that he'd already found his way in to the hen house.

And he didn't plan on leaving.

"That's my seat."

John looks up disinterestedly to see Crank, a kid he only knows because he'd nervously bought a gram of weed off of him and Curt once. The guy is being awfully confrontational right now considering he had looked like he was going to piss himself during that entire last interaction they'd had.

"Don't see your name on it."

Crank gives him a baffled look, clearly annoyed. "I don't- I don't need my *name on it*. I *always* sit here."

"Class, please take your seats so we can begin," the teacher says, pointedly looking over at them because Crank is the only one still standing. The boy looks at him expectantly, and John sucks on his teeth before breaking out into a slow, shark-like smile.

"If you don't fuck off," he tells the scrawny teenager, leaning close

and dropping his voice to a whisper, “I’m gonna write *my* name on the damn chair in *your* blood.”

Crank stutters for a moment, shocked, before hightailing it to the back of the classroom. Marge is looking down at him with her mouth pinched in distaste when he settles into his seat again with a satisfied smirk, clearly having overheard.

“That was a little barbaric, don’t you think?”

Instead of acknowledging the girl speaking to him right away, he checks her boyfriend’s reaction. He’s still not looking at him, but John can tell there’s an upward crook to his mouth. Gale is amused. John preens.

“Had to get my point across, princess,” he replies smoothly, and he can tell that it gets under her skin. But she’s in a relationship with the king, and well, John doesn’t respect her enough to call her the queen.

“There’s nicer ways to get your point across other than *threatening* somebody.”

John gives her a half shrug of one of his shoulders. “Well, I guess I’m not very nice then.”

Marge regards him like he’s a stain on the bottom of her favorite shoes. She places a protective hand on Gale’s arm as she stands up to leave. “I guess not.”

After Marge gives Gale a wet goodbye kiss that has John clutching the edges of his notebook and grinding his jaw, Gale finally partially turns

to face him. John realizes the football player isn't amused anymore, but is instead now upset.

"Don't do that," he quietly but firmly tells him.

John tries to keep a straight face because *how the fuck* does Gale *want* him to treat the girlfriend of the guy he likes and that had tried to kiss him?

He supposes Gale doesn't know the first part, though, and as of right now is under the impression of quite the opposite. He's supposed to be fixing that. He decides to play naive, even if Gale doesn't buy it.

"Don't do what?"

Gale gives him an unconvinced look, but the longer the two hold eye contact the softer the blond's features fall until there's no trace of ire at all. "Your, um, your jacket is in my locker."

It hadn't went over John's head that the boy had taken off with it still on the other night. The fact has very much stuck with him since, actually, and not left him alone.

"You can keep it, it looked better on you anyways," John responds, trying to sound normal about it despite the fact that the words are making his stomach do Olympic-worthy somersaults. "Was thinking about getting a new sheepskin coat, actually."

Gale, with his head ducked shyly and cheeks rosy from the compliment, laughs. It's a faint one, but John doesn't think he's ever heard someone make a more wonderful sound.

“Please don’t,” the quarterback implores with sparkling eyes. John stares for a moment, drinking in the warm expression on Gale’s face, and before he can reply the teacher is starting class and Gale has to turn around to face the front.

He makes it about 10 minutes into the lesson before he starts to feel like he’s going through literal withdrawals from the lack of Gale’s attention with how he’s so close within reach. He rips a corner of the paper he’d been writing on for the class off, and scribbles down a quick little message.

“*Psst.”* Gale doesn’t budge, and he kicks his foot forward to bump one of the legs of his chair. “*Buck.”*

When Gale turns around with a quirked eyebrow and a slightly annoyed look that’s betrayed by the small smile he’s sporting, John is brought back to their first meeting and how he’d been almost stunned into silence by how good-looking the guy was up close. Looking at Gale Cleven would never get any easier, he realizes.

He’s the kind of beautiful that almost hurt to not be able to touch.

John waves the parchment he’d folded into a tiny square at the football player, and gestures for him to hold out his hand. Gale squints his eyes at him facetiously, but sticks his arm out behind him nonetheless. John places it into his balled up fist, and bites his lip to hide his disappointment when the fleeting touch between them is lost.

This is really gay, he thinks as he watches the quarterback try to sneakily read his handwriting, *this is really gay even for me.*

But then Gale slowly folds the note back up without turning back around at first, and John has a sinking feeling that the answer to his question is going to be no. Eventually, though, Gale gives him a hesitant nod of his head.

And the note had only simply asked if Gale wanted to work on their project at John's house tonight, but to John it felt like he'd just won the lottery.

-

Chapter End Notes

these last two chapters have been shorter and I apologize for that, I've been working literally and unfortunately 60 hours a week lately to save for school. But it's nice to come home and write a little chapter and relax with a glass of wine! love this story and you guys <3

i also apologize for not responding to all your comments on the last chapter, i was going to before posting this but I just get so excited to update because of how lovely you guys are in what you say about the story! i'm going to reply after posting this update :)

let me know what you guys think of this chapter below! x

Chapter 13: champagne problems

Chapter Notes

and we're back baby! couldn't leave you guys hanging <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-

because i dropped your hand while dancing
left you out there standing
crestfallen on the landing
champagne problems

-

Curt decides to fuck off on the rest of his classes before lunch without even *telling* John, and then has the audacity to claim he's '*unavailable'* until after school when John texts him to ask why he isn't at their spot under the bleachers. Which throws John for another loop, because he can't remember the last time Curt wasn't available to him, especially in cases of crisis. John supposes though that he has been kind of a shit friend lately and doesn't really have any right to be upset with Curt. So, he sends a short but understanding reply and the two agree to meet up after school.

But then John goes and gets fucking detention again.

Which really isn't a surprise, this is a weekly occurrence for him since keeping his mouth shut is a genuine struggle he has most of the time,

but it's *really fucking inconvenient.*

Luckily Gale had football practice so they weren't hanging out until five at John's house tonight, but that left a smaller window for him to be able to see Curt and call off this whole stupid bet situation for good. He *needs* to before he confronts Gale about the possible mutually shared feelings between them tonight.

Heavy on the *possible* shared feelings, because John has been doing a whole lot of realizing this past week that he's *much* more fucked in the head and less okay than he'd previously gaslighted himself into believing. Who knows, he could have deluded himself into thinking Gale felt the same way as him as some sort of weird coping mechanism. Who the fuck knows anymore.

Repression is a real bitch.

Either way, John is on his absolute best behavior during detention because he has places to *be* and doesn't want to have to stay any longer than the mandatory hour. But somehow this pisses Huglin off even more. The guy doesn't even take his usual nap and instead eyes John suspiciously the entire time until 4 o'clock finally rolls around.

"Alright, Egan, I guess you're free to go."

John springs up from his seat feeling extremely relieved as he swings his backpack over his shoulder. "Thank you!"

Huglin looks absolutely floored at the words of gratitude. Which is fair, because it was extremely out of character for John, but the thanks was genuine. He is thankful as fuck to be leaving. Regardless, the colonel's surprised features quickly morph into anger.

"Are you *talking back to me?"*

John blinks a few times a in confusion. He wonders if the dude is on something again because should he have just walked out without any word of acknowledgment to Huglin at all? He's highly doubtful that would have gotten him much of a better response.

"… No?" Huglin's ears go red. He's *fuming* and John is *confused. "*I mean- I mean no, sir?"

"That's it, Egan, I'm adding an hour to your detention!"

John opens his mouth to protest because *are you fucking kidding me-*

"That's enough with the attitude, or I'll keep you here all night!"

Despite the fact that John is almost 100% positive that that's super fucking illegal, he throws his hands up in defeat and sits back down.

Fuck him for being *nice* for once.

-

5 o'clock rolls around and John is out the door without uttering a

single word before Huglin can do anything about it this time.

His phone had died before he'd been able to tell Gale he might run a little late which had been fucking *fantastic*. The last thing he needs right now is Gale thinking he stood him up.

Time had then proceeded to go by so painfully slowly after that he had started to become almost convinced the damn clock on the wall had to be broken. Every spaced out *tik* and *tok* that echoed throughout the silent room had him grinding down his teeth until his head started to hurt. It took everything in him to not absolutely crash out because he knew Huglin would jump at the opportunity to make him suffer here all night.

He's sprinting down the hallway now and throws the school front doors open. His long legs take the steps down two by two to get to his bike as quickly as possible. Usually the ride home takes him about 25 minutes. He might have maybe sped a little and gotten there in 20. Even so, he's sure Gale is long gone when he finally pulls up.

He's pretty shocked when he sees a familiar head of blond hair walking in the opposite direction only a few yards down the sidewalk. Gale must have (rightfully so) assumed he wasn't coming and started to head home.

But he'd waited for him for 20 minutes. The thought makes him both sad and fills him with that strange warmth at the same time.

"Buck!"

Gale almost immediately turns around. John can't help but feel smug about how quickly the football players responds to the nickname he claims to disapprove of.

By the time Gale makes his way back, John has his bike turned off and is leaning against it waiting. He tries to project a collected and calm aura, but with every inch of distance Gale closes between them he can feel his heart beating a little faster. He hadn't realized before how nervous he was to see Gale again after the events on the swing set last night.

"What took ya' so long?"

Gale asks the question with an indifference that feels ingenuine. He has his hands in his pockets to feign being unconcerned about John's answer, but his rigid posture screams tenseness. There's comfort for John in knowing that Gale is putting up a front, too.

"The Hugster couldn't get enough of my pretty face in detention today. Made me stay a whole extra hour just for an excuse to spend time with me."

The statement makes Gale raise a singular flawless eyebrow. *He has to pluck them,* John thinks internally. Though he wouldn't be shocked if they were naturally that perfect all on their own.

"I'm sure it had nothin' to do with any unruly behavior on your part."

"I was an absolute angel!" John places his hand over his heart. "Scout's honor."

Gale's cool exterior cracks finally. A smile softens his features as he laughs and shakes his head.

"You were definitely not a Boy Scout."

John chuckles in return because, well, that's a fair assumption. Feeling more relaxed as they fall into their usual banter, he pushes himself off of his bike and starts to lead the way to his front door.

"I'd bet that you *definitely* were."

Gale's laugh is quieter this time as he follows behind him into the house. "You'd lose that bet unfortunately."

John turns around in surprise while haphazardly kicking off his shoes. "Really?"

The football captain clears his throat as he bends down to neatly and gracefully unlace his sneakers unlike John. "We couldn't afford it. Ma's chemo was too expensive."

John makes an awkward *ah* sound. He doesn't really know what to say to that, but luckily he can sense from Gale's averted gaze when he stands up that the blond isn't keen on discussing the subject further. And luckily for Gale, John is an expert at changing the topic to avoid talking about sensitive things.

"You were wrong too, by the way. I actually *was* a Boy Scout," John informs his younger counterpart matter-of-factly. Now it's Gale's turn to look at him with surprise as they walk through the living room.

"Well, I was for two weeks. Had a crush on a boy and didn't know that's what it was or how to express my emotions properly so I stabbed him with a pencil."

Not properly dealing with feelings is definitely something he still struggles with *clearly*.

The nonchalantly delivered story makes Gale stop in his tracks and it takes an extra second for John to realize the boy isn't following him anymore.

When he turns around, Gale's lips are parted in stupefaction. He's no doubt speechless, because who the fuck does that really, but then he bursts out laughing. He ends up fully doubled over with his hands clutching his stomach.

"Oh god, I hope you've realized wantin' to take somebody out doesn't mean you have to literally *take them out.*"

John shrugs a shoulder with a cheeky grin. “Hey, he was fine! Didn’t even end up needing stitches.”

More delightful sounds bubble past Gale’s lips. The other boy’s laughter has a way of scrambling his mind so much that he doesn't think before he opens his mouth next.

"Besides, I haven't stabbed you yet, have I?"

All traces of humor are immediately wiped from Gale's face at John's words. *Fuck.*

"Um." That was way too soon and forward and John knows it. He needs to ease into this. Gale is like a skittish deer, and John is

trampling too loudly and quickly through the forest. He's going to ruin his shot- if he even has one. "My, uh, room is upstairs."

The football player nods wordlessly. He opens and closes his mouth a few times. Gale still doesn't make a sound as he furrows his eyebrows together. John would kill to be that one creep Eddie Collin, or whatever the fuck his name is, from those stupid vampire movies Crosby's girlfriend had made all of their friend group watch when they were all plastered one weekend and know what's going on in that blond head of his. Finally, Gale speaks up with a gravelly voice.

"Your... your house is really nice, by the way." John looks around the spotless living room with Gale. There isn't a single thing out of place. Every object looks brand new; like it's never been touched. It's always felt more like some kind of set than a home to John. "It's so… clean."

John tears his eyes away from the expensive couch that he can't remember the last time he ever sat on at the evident self-consciousness in Gale's tone. When John had been to Gale's house, it had been littered with beer bottles and take out boxes no doubtedly from the teen's dad all throughout the house. Well, except for Gale's room. Gale's room had been so tidy it felt like you could eat off of the floor.

He doesn't know how to tell him that everything he sees is fake. It's so fucking fake it makes him want to burn the house down sometimes. When his dad's life insurance money had come in, his mom had spent it on replacing everything in the house his father had ever possibly touched in an attempt to wipe away the memories of him that were apparently too painful for her. She bought the best and fanciest items she could find like the nicer the replacement was the less sad the whole thing would be.

It hadn't worked. It never made it any easier to be in that house for either of them.

"That's because nobody lives here."

Gale's head snaps towards him and his eyes are swimming with questions at the vague statement. But he doesn't ask them, just like John hadn't asked any earlier. It's like the two have an unspoken agreement with each other when it comes to family shit. Both just understood in their own way without any need for context.

It’s crazy to him that you can feel so known by somebody you met not even two weeks ago.

Well, not even two weeks ago as far as John remembers.

-

When they get to his room, Gale immediately gravitates to his bookshelf that takes up an entire wall. He has to step over mountains of clothes to get to it because John hadn’t fucking thought things through and fucking *cleaned,* but the football captain doesn’t seem to mind nor comment on it.

John watches from his bed as Gale runs his fingers across the spines of the countless novels before picking one out and turning it around in his hands to examine it. “Have you read all of these?”

A flare of defensiveness rises in his chest at the question. He squares his shoulders. “Would that surprise you?”

Gale’s lips curl upwards as he gently places the book back in its spot. “No.”

Oh, John thinks. His shoulders slump back down. He doesn’t know what to do with that reply, but it makes his heart flutter a bit.

Gale joins him on the bed, and John almost makes it a full hour straight this time working on the project and he's pretty proud of himself for that feat. It's at the 47 minute mark he lets out a prolonged sigh and falls back into the bed from his seated position. He then throws a dramatic arm over his face.

“Buck, if we don't take a break soon, I'm gonna lose my mind."

Gale chuckles but doesn't lift his head out from where it's buried in their project. "Can't lose what you never had, John."

"*Buck*, please*!*" John rolls over onto his stomach and clasps his hands together to mimic begging. "If I have to read *one more* line of poetry my eyeballs might actually melt out of my *head*."

Gale rolls his eyes but closes his textbook regardless. "You're so dramatic. The poems aren't that bad."

"I didn't say they were *bad*, Buck. It's just *school.* A man can only take so much! We already spend the majority of our day there."

He's used the shortened version of his name for Gale three times now. Which he knew was excessive, but he couldn't help it. He loves the

way it rolls off of his tongue.

Buck, Buck, Buck. Buck and Bucky.

Gale toys with the cover of his textbook. “I- I like when you call me that."

John's surprise is swiftly taken over by a smug grin. "*Knew* it."

Gale grins for a second as well but his expression is quick to return to being somber again.

"It’s- my name carries so much weight in this town. It comes with so many expectations."

Gale suddenly looks so vulnerable that John can't help but feel like it's predatory to be witness to such a raw display of emotion. He's never thought he would see the football captain look almost... *small.* Well, Gale *is* smaller than him in stature, but his reputation had always made him seem bigger than he is.

"I- I feel like somebody else when I’m with you. More- more carefree. I think I like them better sometimes."

The hum of the house is suddenly so loud it thrums in his ears, the temperature of the room is too hot, and the air around them seems to be thinning. John hadn't expected this. He doesn't know what he expected, honestly, since he hadn't let himself think too much about it.

You make me want to be better, he wants to reply so earnestly that it frightens him. He's spent so long convincing himself he's fine the way he is. He's spent so long in denial that it's *better* to remain this closed off from people and to push them away with force if you have to. But oh god, those blue eyes make him want to crack open his chest and bare his heart and soul to Gale.

The blond isn't looking at him, instead choosing to stare at his hands that tightly grip the book in front of him. John has to wet his lips with his tongue and swallow twice before his throat doesn't feel too dry to utter even singular syllable.

"Gale, about last night-"

"I think we who should just focus on the project."

The cut-off feels like a slap in the face that snaps him out of any haze he might have been in.

"It's fine," Gale says insistently with shifty eyes. "I misread things. I was confused."

John is left speechless for a second out of disbelief. He knew the boy definitely had some insane internal sexuality crisis going on, but Gale can't actually be *that* delusional. He'd all but straight up said it to the younger boy earlier.

"You didn't misread anything. I-"

"I misread things," Gale says more forcefully this time. "I was confused, and I misread things."

John can only blink in reply. There's a coldness that starts to expand in his core.

"I had to have been." Gale isn't telling John anymore, he's asking. He's pleading. "This- this was isn't part of the plan."

"Plan?" John asks numbly. Gale worries his bottom lip between his teeth and looks away.

“Marge’s ma’ and mine were- they were the best of friends. I’ve known her since diapers." Gale scrubs a hand down his face and through his hair. He suddenly looks exhausted. "They were talkin’ about our wedding before we could even walk. The two had our entire future planned out by the time we hit high school. The chapel it’ll happen at, where we’ll honeymoon and live- hell, they even picked out the middle names of the damn kids we’ll have. They want us to have five, if you were wondering.”

The bitterness seaping into his voice by the end of him talking is palpable. John tastes the sourness of it in his mouth like it's his own.

“Is that what you want?" He asks pensively, intensely studying the side of Gale's face he can see. The football player lets out a sudden and out of place laugh.

"It doesn't matter what I want," Gale scoffed, sounding angry. Then suddenly he looked guilty- like he felt bad about being angry. "It’s- it’s all she talked about those last couple of months before she passed. How sad she was that she wouldn’t get to see my bright future."

John feels sick for the boy in front of him. He aches.

"It doesn't sound like you got any say in that future, Gale."

Gale's shoulders are hunched in on themselves defeatedly. He looks like someone who thinks that they're doomed no matter what they do- like he's fighting a battle he's already lost.

"She gave up hers for me, John." Gale's voice is pained. "She had me so young, but she believed it was God's plan. She was deeply religious. I still hear her in my dreams telling me all the time how homosexuals are a disgrace. I don't- I don't agree with her, I swear, but she'd be so disappointed if she-"

A single tear rolls down Gale's cheek. John watches him take a deep breath.

"She was so proud of who she thought I was going to be."

John knows that feeling; knows what it's like mourning who you might have been. To carry the burden of what could have been different. To be crushed by the weight of who you know you should be.

He hears his doctors words in the back of his mind.

"Your dad wouldn't want you to continue going down the path you've been going down."

But in Gale's case, it's different. Gale isn't like him. Gale is *good*. Him liking boys doesn't change that.

"I don't know how anyone could be not proud of you."

Gale's tears start to flow down his face more heavily now. He's looking at John with wide, unguarded eyes.

"I mean it," John implores to him with even more adamant conviction. "There's a reason people look up to you so much in this town. I think if she wouldn't be proud of you, then- then damn her, Buck."

Gale seems to be physically taken aback. John keeps going, the words pouring from him out of passion.

"I think- I think you're amazing, Gale. I think-"

I think I'm falling in love with you, he almost says.

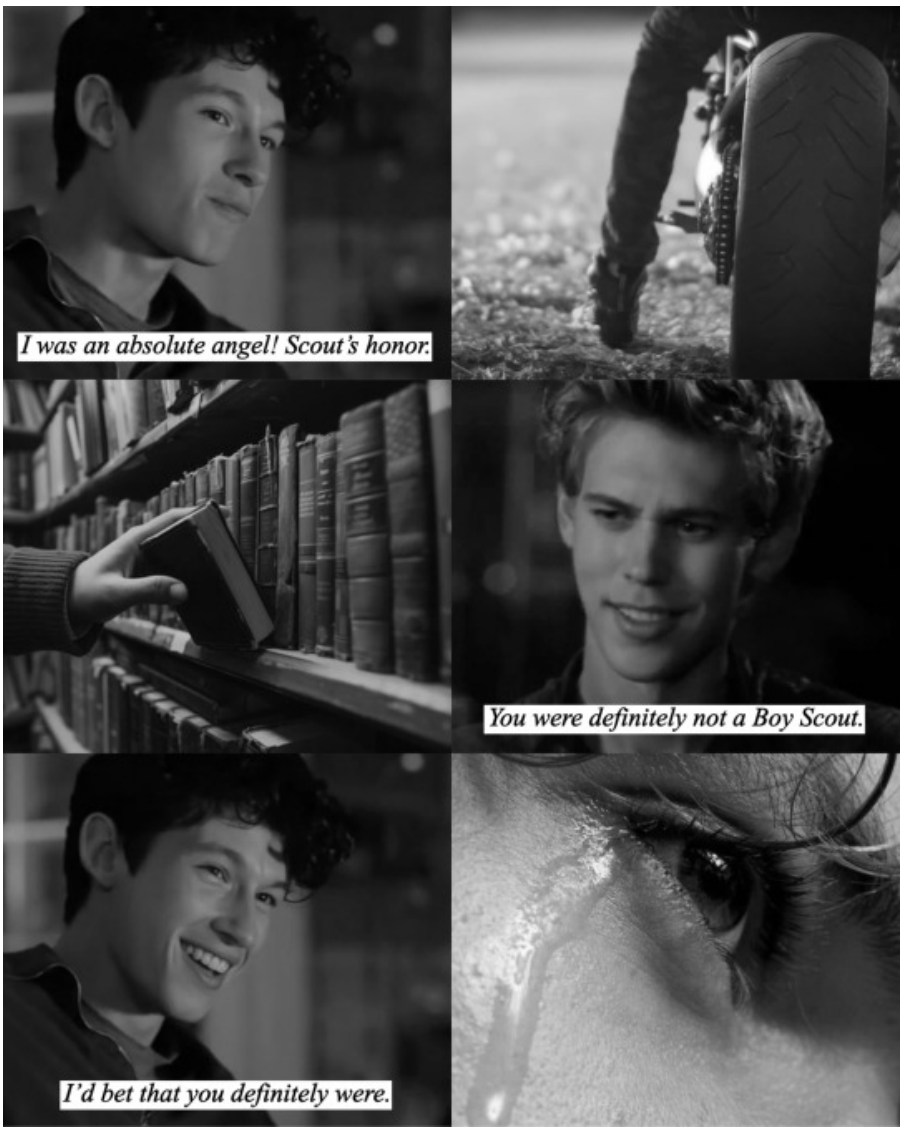
But something in Gale's face asks him not to say it; to not go any further. To stop here. To stop now. John clears his throat.

"I think- I think if anyone is gonna ace this project, it's gonna be us, Buck."

The silence between them seems like it'll never end. John holds his breath. Finally, Gale wipes at his running nose with his sleeve. After a few sniffles, he offers John a small hesitant smile.

"I wouldn't count on it."

-


I was an absolute angel! Scout's honor.
You were definitely not a Boy Scout.
I'd bet that you definitely were.

-

Chapter End Notes

hello, i suck, you can thank the people commenting on my tiktok account and here for this very delayed update and not giving up on me aaahhh. means so much when i see you guys ask for more!

also, did not proof read this whatsoever the second it felt done i went to post it before the ghost of writers block came back and convinced me to do otherwise. so let me know if there's any glaring mistakes, but otherwise i really hope you guys enjoy!

a lot of emotions for these guys packed into this chapter can't dance around each other forever we gotta move things alonggg. also john 100% forgot about curt and calling off the bet in his panic and nervousness to see gale and the ramifications of that shall come to fruition soon.

i apologize again for the delays□□ let me know your thoughts, hearing them inspires me!

Chapter 14: illicit affairs

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-

and that's the thing about illicit affairs
and clandestine meetings and longing stares
it's born from just one single glance
but it dies, and it dies, and it dies
a million little times

-

The rest of their time spent working on the project consisted of John desperately trying to not bite his tongue off with how *hard* it is to keep his mouth shut about whatever this thing between them is, or *was,* and Gale making it clear that there's nothing left to say. Where Gale used to lean closer to him, he leans away. There's a foot of space he keeps between them on the bed that feels like a mile.

They go their seperate ways that night with quiet goodbyes that echo around in John's thoughts like gunshots and won't let him close his eyes. He replays their conversation over and over again in his head like a broken record.

It's a hard pill to swallow that the first person that's made him feel something *real*, the first person to make him even *want* to feel again,

won't allow themselves to feel anything for John. Gale would rather bury those feelings six feet under than ever let them see the light of day.

John understood, but it didn't make it hurt any less.

He still ends up getting to school on time the next day, but that's only because he doesn't get any sleep at all. He stumbles his way through the school's parking lot still half asleep but is jolted awake when he spots Gale and Marge *making out* in the front seats of one of their cars out of the corner of his eye.

Acid burns its way up his throat. He swallows it down and doesn't let himself stick around long enough to analyze if Gale is genuinely enjoying it or not. It doesn't matter anymore.

Or at least it *shouldn't* matter anymore. Gale had made where he stands clear.

John proceeds to run into Curt russeling through his locker as he's making his way to his own, and *boy* is his friend a sight for sore eyes. John falls against the closed door next to him and lets out a heavy sigh. Curt doesn't even spare him a glance.

"Oh, good," He says sounding entirely unconcerned. "Youse alive."

John lets his head bang against the metal behind him and rubs at his tired eyes with closed fists. "Why wouldn't I be alive?"

Curt closes his locker with enough force it makes John jump. "I dunno, maybe because we were supposed to hang out yestuhday and I nevah

heard from ya?"

Fuck.

He'd completely forgotten he'd made plans to meet up with Curt in the chaos of getting stuck in detention and his phone dying.

Well, no, the real reason he forgot was *much* worse. He'd blown off his friend over a boy.

"Curt-"

"It's whateva, Bucky." Curt waves his hand at him dismissively. "Youse were with Cleven, right?"

John's stomach sinks. If there was an award for worst friend of the year, he'd be first place.

"It sucked waitin' around, but I gotta admire the effort youse is puttin' intuh this." Curt shoulders his backpack and quirks his lips into a half-smile. "But it must mean youse is afraid ya gonna *lose.*"

For half a second John is confused on what the fuck he's talking about, but then he remembers *why* he'd arranged to meet up with his friend yesterday.

He was supposed to call off that *stupid fucking bet.*

He'd gotten so caught up in rushing to his house so that Gale wouldn't think he bailed on him that the bet had been pushed to the back of his mind completely. Well, it was always in the back of his mind and not at the forefront. Did he *ever* actually care about this bet? He can't remember. All he knows now is that he really, really cares about Gale.

And Gale would be *so* crushed if he knew that the only reason John had gotten close to him was technically for a bet. The two of them are still friends, John is pretty sure they are at least, and he really doesn't want to ruin that if it's all he gets to have of Gale.

He could call it off now, but the way Curt's smile doesn't reach his eyes stops him. Right now, Curt thinks he blew him off to win the bet they had going on. To say now that he didn't care about the bet, that didn't want to do it anymore, would be revealing that John ditched his friend over a *crush*. It feels like that would be so much worse, and he had been shitty enough to Curt this week already.

"Just don't let it happen again, ya hear?" Curt asserts while jabbing a finger into John's shoulder to emphasize his point.

John can't bring himself to respond verbally. Instead, he does his best to force the corners of his lips upward and gives a short nod. If Curt notices his odd behavior, he isn't able to comment on it as Rosie thankfully comes barreling into the conversation from out of seemingly nowhere.

"Shit!" Curt exclaims. The New Yorker clutches at his chest. "Do we need to get youse a fuckin' cat bell, Rosenthal?"

"Collars aren't really my kink, Biddick," Rosie replies smoothly. He gives the two of them a broad grin and claps them both on the shoulders enthusiastically. How friendly Rosie is would probably be off-putting if he was someone else, but the guy is just so damn *likable*.

"Anywho, I've been sent over with a message."

Rosie brandishes a folded piece of paper to John and he accepts it curiously. Immediately, his mind jumps to the possibility of it being from Gale. He can't think of anyone else that would be writing him notes. His heart soars at the thought as he unfolds it.

He's sorely disappointed when it's from Kenny Lemmons. It's his phone number scrawled across the parchment, but what's more interesting to John is what the literal fuck Gale had said to Lemmons at Meatball's brithday party that had made him too afraid to give his number to John in person.

"That new kid on the baseball team gave me 20 bucks to deliver it," Rosie informs them with a shrug. He bids them goodbye, shoots John a wink, and heads off in a different direction.

Curt turns to him with a raised eyebrow and John shows him the scribbled numbers and name. His friend whistles lowly. "Damn, poor Kennyboy doesn't know what he's gettin' into."

John punches Curt lightly on the shoulder and the two both share a laugh. Curt's expression then suddenly changes to something John doesn't recognize; it looks almost gentle. He studies John closely.

"Youse feelin' okay?"

John's taken aback by the question that's no doubt referencing the other night. It's an unfamiliar exchange between Curt and him. Curt is his best friend, there's no doubt about that, but John holds literally *everybody* at a distance. He'd expected for them to brush his little breakdown under the rug. A deep sense of regret settles in him. Curt has stuck by him after all this time, and here he was prioritizing a boy

he'd met less than a month ago over him.

"I'm great," John responds with a smile that's definitely not forced at all. Curt doesn't look convinced in the slightest.

-

John ends up texting Kenneth. Unfortunately, not because he's actually interested, but more out of spite towards Gale.

They end up meeting up to make out under the bleachers and John tries his best to get himself to be into it. He tries to focus on the bruise of Lemmons lips to try to push out the thoughts of what a certain someone else's might feel like, and he lets things go a little further than he should've in the process. He ends up breaking off the kissing out of guilt. He doesn't want to lead the sweet kid on, and he can tell by his enthusiasm this is likely the first time the teenager had ever kissed another boy.

John doesn't really see himself as first-kiss worthy.

They go their separate ways and John honestly kinda forgets about it by the time lunch rolls around since he has much heavier things weighing on him. He walks into the cafeteria to the *pleasant* surprise of Curt sitting at Gale's table again.

Fuck his fucking *life.*

He did *not* want to have to be so up close and personal with the school's beloved power couple so soon after the events of yesterday. He'd even purposely missed his and Gale's shared English class to avoid doing just that. Curt waves him down when he sees him and John grinds his teeth together as he reluctantly makes his way over to the group.

There's a chorus of friendly greetings from everybody at the table, including even Marge. She must be in a good mood today, and he can probably take a guess as to why from what he saw this morning. He avoids looking at the pair for as long as possible and tries his best to just stay tuned into the conversation they had all been having when he sat down even though he can *feel* Gale's intense gaze on him nearly the entire time.

"Damn, Egan, did Lemmons try to eat you today?"

"What?"

Rosie motions to his own neck. "I've seen footballs smaller than that hickey peeking out from your shirt."

John is swift to turn on his phone's camera to see what Rosenthal is talking about, and sure enough there's a *massive* bruise forming to the left of his Adam's apple. He can't even recall Lemmons sucking there. He definitely would've stopped him because John *hates* hickeys; he thinks they look so tacky. He supposes he wasn't really paying much attention towards the end of their encounter, though. There's a sharp inhale from the other side of the table that breaks through his brief embarrassment.

"Lemmons?" Gale questions in a gruff voice. John finally gives in and turns to meet the blond's stare. However, Gale isn't really looking at *him*.

No, Gale's eyes are zeroed in on where the purple spot is blossoming and somehow his blue eyes look *dark*. John watches the muscles in his jaw tick.

"Do you guys remember when *Huglin* walked back into class after lunch with the most poorly concealed hickey ever last year?" Marge's friend (whose name John *still* doesn't know) chimes in with a scandalous tone.

"Ew!" Marjorie squeals, covering her mouth with her dainty hands. "Why did you have to *remind* me?"

"What haunts me has to haunt you, too!"

The table breaks out in an in-depth debate on which teacher they think was macking on the *Colonel* during lunch. John can't even feel proud of how his nickname for his least favorite teacher is catching on because Gale is *still* staring daggers at his neck. Eventually, he tears his eyes away in what appears to be hurt.

It excites John. It angers him. It saddens him.

It sends him spiraling all over again because Gale *doesn't* get to do this. He can't have it both ways.

Eventually, the bell signaling the end of lunch rings and one by one everyone starts to collect their things and rise from their seats.

Everyone except Gale and him.

Marjorie questions this and Gale rattles off something about needing to chat about their project real quick. The two remain silent for a moment even after everyone has been long gone. Gale tightens and untightens his fists where they are resting on the table a few times.

"I specifically asked Lemmons to stay away from you," he forces out from between his clenched teeth eventually.

"You mean you threatened Lemmons to stay away from me," John throws back with bitterness.

Gale closes his eyes for a second. John can tell the blond isn't proud of his actions. When he slowly opens them, he looks up at the ceiling like the answers to this whole fucked up situation might be up there.

"I'm sorry."

John feels himself deflate. He can't bring himself to stay mad at the other teenager. "You don't have any right to do that, Gale," he says quietly.

John doesn't use his usual nickname for the football player. The way Gale flinches signals to John that the fact doesn't go over his head. The younger boy presses his lips together tightly, eyes looking everywhere except at John's own, before taking a deep breath like he's pulling himself back together.

"I know," he tells John with heavy eyes once he finally looks at him. He repeats himself with an empty and vacant tone.

“I know."

-

Chapter End Notes

a shorter update, was originally longer but decided to cut the chapter in half since the other portion isn’t finished and I could give you guys another much overdue update □□

also i deeplyyy regret not proof reading the last chapter, was just so excited to finally post for this story again! i definitely went back and tweaked a few things if you’d want to check out the more refined version of the last chapters events lol.

let me know if you hate where the story is going, if you love it, what you wanna see! always love to hear from you guys xxx.

Chapter 15: the story of us

Chapter Notes

sooo i went back and changed all the chapter titles to taylor swift songs i listened to while writing it/inspired it and added a specific lyric that matches the chapter at the top xx

helps with my creativity for this story/my imagination since i love music so much and hope it does the same for yours :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-

so many things that i wish you knew
so many walls up i can't break through

now i'm standing alone in a crowded room
and we're not speaking and i'm dying to know
is it killing you like it's killing me?

i don't know what to say since the twist of fate
when it all broke down
and the story of us looks a lot like a tragedy now

-

John is the one who got up and walked away from the lunch table first. He forced himself to be.

He attends the next of his two classes physically, but not at all mentally. Bubble's is quick to call him out on it during Algebra II.

"You and Crosby both been on a different planet all day."

John makes himself sit up straight and tries to shake himself out of the pity party he's throwing for himself in his head. "What's, uh," He picks up the assignment in front of him to try to look like he has some kind of idea as to what's going on. "What's going on with Croz?"

Bubbles snorts and reaches over to flip the paper John is holding around. He had been looking at the wrong side.

"Dunno," Bubbles tells him with a shrug as he goes back to jotting down some notes from the slideshow the teacher has displayed upfront. "I think he's stressed about that project you two have going on in English. Tried asking about it but he got all worked up and left."

John frowns. The project they'd been given is annoying, but it definitely isn't hard. If John isn't having any issues besides mind-numbing boredom, Crosby *definitely* shouldn't be having any problems. Maybe that Sandra chick he'd been paired off with had turned out to be an idiot or something.

"Guess we can ask him about it later tonight."

"Tonight?" John doesn't have any plans for tonight besides wallowing in bed and staring at his ceiling fan despairingly.

"Curt told me you guys were coming to the game?"

That sly bastard.

He really wants to see this damn bet play out. John has no doubts that that's why the New Yorker told everyone they were going. Well, John would quite frankly rather eat glass than go to Gale's game tonight and watch him be cheered on by his cheerleader girlfriend. It would probably be less fucking painful.

He's about tell Bubbles just that, but the teacher chooses then to decide they're being too chatty and separate them.

Whatever, John decides when he's settled in his new seat. It's not like he actually has to talk to Gale at the game. Besides, he could probably use some quality time with his friends, right?

-

John's final class of the day is history, and it's the one he never fails to skip. It was his dads favorite subject. He'd heard enough about it as a kid to last a lifetime. It's not like he needed to go, anyways. The only thing the class did for him was remind him of things he didn't want to be reminded of.

So, that's the hour he always meets up with Curt under the bleachers to smoke a joint or two before the day is over. He's on his way there when he turns a corner to see two figures in a heated discussion behind the school.

One is a teenager in gym clothes, head hung low, and the other is a very agitated grown man. The latter starts waving his hands around wildly while the other remains as is. As John gets within earshot he

recognizes the familiar slur of Gale's dad voice from the time he'd stumbled into Gale's bedroom, meaning the teenager must be Gale himself.

"- if you love me, you'll do this for me, boy!"

"Dad, *please*, I can't do that to the other fellas on my team! They've worked *too hard*-"

"I don't care how hard they've worked!" Gale's dad seizes his kid by both shoulders and pulls him forward roughly. "You're gonna do it because I said so, Gale."

John doesn't even realize he's closed the distance between him and the two so fast until he suddenly finds himself planted between the football player and his parent with a firm hand on the older man's chest.

"Don't put your hands on him like that," John hisses.

He tries to shove the guy back with fury, but he's still a teenager taking on an adult and it only causes the larger man to stumble back a few steps. He's on John with shockingly impressive speed considering the fact that the guy is obviously absolutely wasted. His back hits the ground so hard it sends shock waves up his spine.

"I'll do it, Dad!" Gale suddenly cries out.

The man's attention is immediately redirected from John. His head whips around, and he's pushing himself off of John and to his feet before the wind can even find its way back into John's lungs. It had

been knocked out of him when they'd fell and he's still gasping for air.

"I'll do it," Gale repeats. He's breathing almost as heavily as John with wide, frightened eyes; they shift between his unhinged parent and where John is still sprawled out on the concrete with panic. "Just go *home*, dad, please. Just go home."

The football player's parent rushes at him and the blond flinches, but all his dad does is envelop the boy in an aggressive hug. Gale pats the man's back with wariness. "Thank you, Gale, thank you."

The guy finally staggers off and John rolls over to push himself up on to his knees at least. He wheezes again, because holy *fuck* that guy tackled him hard, and Gale is suddenly pressed up against his body and hauling him from the ground and on his feet. He is quick to let go of John after. He doesn't linger and puts immediate space between them.

He proceeds to start to pace back and forth in front of John while running a hand haggardly across his face and through his hair repeatedly. He soon comes to a halt in front of John and crosses his arms.

"You shouldn't have done that," the football player huffs.

John doesn’t miss a beat annd ignores the statement completely, because he couldn't give a fuck less. He wasn't about to stand by and watch the man hurt Gale. No fucking way.

"You didn't tell me he was violent like that."

"Because it wasn't any of your damn business!"

Almost immediately after he'd let out the near-shout, Gale looks apologetic. His voice drops to not much above a mumble. "I'm- I'm sorry. He isn't usually. I've- I've never seen him like that. I think he's in some real trouble."

John puts the pieces together straight away. "He wants you to point shave again. How much is the margin he wants you to win by this time?"

Gale doesn't answer him right away, instead swallowing heavily. The pause between them is thick with the shame that radiates off of the blond.

"He wants me to lose."

John gapes. He can't remember the last time their school's football team *lost;* they were the best in the state. To lose on purpose would be almost impossible to do and go undetected entirely.

"Gale, this whole gig he's had you doing is against the law in *general*, but losing makes it *significantly* more likely you'll get *caught-"*

*"*Since when do you care about the law, John?" Gale snaps and pinches his mouth together in a scowl.

"I don't," John replies easily. "I care about you."

John can tell his words take a deep effect on Gale. The blond tilts his face away, but not before John sees his lips slightly tremble.

"He needs me to, John. I don't have a choice."

John had tried hard to be understanding of Gale's situation before, but he had to draw the line here. How long would Gale let himself be trapped by the ghost of who his mom wanted him to be and who his dad was telling him to be? When did it end? He’s realizing now that it likely never would unless somebody intervened. Gale is loyal to a fault.

No matter how many times someone kicked that puppy, it was going to come crawling back. It's all Gale had ever known.

"When is it going to start to matter what you need, Gale? Are you going to live for other people for the rest of your life?"

Gale doesn't answer and John shakes his head in dismay. He points his finger accusingly and speaks with certitude that's almost cruel.

"That's not love, Gale. That's *control*."

At first the football player reels back like the sentence had been a physical blow. He's quick to recover, though, no doubt fueled with rage because deep down he *knows* the older boy is right. His stance turns defensive. Nose scrunched up at John, Gale speaks with a tone that's clearly looking to cause hurt.

"What would you know about love, John, huh?"

The words hit the exact sore spot Gale had been going for. However he still can't help but laugh regardless of how hurt he is, because what an easy insult to throw at him. It's almost ridiculous, because it's not like John has ever claimed to know much on the subject at all. He's always been very forthcoming about his escapades with different men and women that never had even a semblance of commitment. Who gives a fuck? What did it matter?

He doesn't *need* a lot of experience with love to know that what he'd just witnessed definitely wasn't it.

"I know that someone who loves you would never ask you to put yourself at risk like this."

Before Gale can respond, there's a strong New York accent calling for them.

"Ayo! Romeo and Juliet!"

Both boys whip around to face Curt who is waving at them from the direction of the bleachers. Judging by his demeanor, John doubts he'd been there long. He doesn't move closer and instead chooses to shout across the yards of pavement between them. John can't blame him, since his last interaction with Gale had been a little hostile.

"Sorry tuh interrupt, but is youse comin' to smoke this shit or what Bucky?!"

John yells back something along the lines of *be there in a minute* and Gale does his best to offer a friendly wave. Still turned towards Curt, Gale's voice drops to a whisper like the other boy might hear them.

The interruption had zapped the fight out of both of them.

"I have to, John."

John stares at Gale's side profile unabashedly, but Gale is adamant on not looking at him. John starts to shake his head once again and walk away. He ends up pausing last minute, still halfway turned towards where Gale stands, unable to give up on the football player he'd grown so fond of so quickly over these past two weeks. He gives one last try at getting through to him.

"You don't have to do anything, Gale. That's one of the best things about this life. I hope you eventually realize that."

John then starts towards the direction Curt had headed, and he does his best to not look back at the shell of a boy behind him.

-

Chapter End Notes

gasp three updates in a week after being gone for months?? all of your comments and kudos even after i went MIA for so long has had me super inspired thank you guys so much for the welcome back.

but i do want to know now that i'm back after so long, do you guys prefer shorter chapters and quicker updates or wait a little longer for a bigger chapter?

lmk below and also any other thoughts you have i look forward to hearing them and your opinions the most when i post!

also next chapter is called ‘loml,’ as you now know every chapter is named after a certain taylor song because it heavily relates to it… do with that what you will

Chapter 16: loml

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

—

it was legendary
it was momentery
it was unnecessary
should've let it stay buried

what a valiant roar
what a bland goodbye
the coward claimed he was a lion

—

It's like everything is happening in slow motion as Gale walks out onto the field for his game.

It feels like there's shackles around his ankles weighing him down. With every step in his cleats, the imaginary chains get heavier. It's towards the end of November now, but despite the cold weather there's sweat collecting above his eyebrows. Every deep, anxious breath he takes as his team gets into formation comes out as a thick cloud.

As he walks towards his position as the quarterback a few feet behind

Rosie, he can't help himself from scanning the stands for a familiar head of brown, unkept curls. He'd only ever seen him at the last game, never a single one before that, so he's not actually expecting to find the older boy in the thick crowd of enthusiastic students. But he still looks.

When he doesn't see him, though, he's relieved. It's better he's not there, considering when Gale had spotted him last week he'd gotten himself sacked from how much John's presence had distracted him. He'd meant to mess up the play intentionally, just not like *that*.

John hadn't realized it yet back then, but the day prior to that one had been the first time they'd spoken in almost ten years. Not that he'd thought John *should* have known that, as they had only been friends for a brief period of time and had been very young. And it had meant nothing, right? At least he'd figured it had to John, as it had become obvious to Gale once he'd returned to their school that the other boy remembered none of their shared youth. Or worse, he'd feared these past few years that he did, and was actively ignoring Gale. The latter had evidently turned out not to be the case.

Now, though, Gale almost finds himself wishing it was. Things would be a lot less complicated if John Egan had avoided him.

Gale turns his helmet around in his hands to look at the number 2 printed on the side. He remembers the day he'd picked it at 14-years-old. Everyone around him had been choosing favorite numbers, lucky numbers, or numbers with meaning and Gale... Gale, at first, couldn't think of a number that meant something to him. Gale didn't have a *'favorite'* anything really. Gale had always liked what he'd been told to like by his parents; more specifically, by his mother at first.

It had always been his priority to make her as happy as possible in the time they'd had left with her, and that hadn't stopped being his priority after her death. The pressure, if anything, had worsened, as he had then felt like it was his responsibility to make sure his father was

happy, too, since his wife was gone. But neither of them had never mentioned anything about numbers.

He had been about to just tell his coach to pick a random one for him when memories he'd tried his best to not to reminisce on crept up in his mind.

"Do you have a favorite number?" Little John Egan asks him. They're lying next to one another on the grass field of their subdivision's playground.

Little Gale gives the question as much thought as a 7-year-old can muster. "I don't think so."

"Mine is 2."

Little Gale blinks up at the sky with round, innocent eyes. "Why 2?"

If he did have a favorite number, it definitely wouldn't be that. Maybe a hundred, or maybe even a thousand. He wasn't sure and had only just recently learned to count to 1,000, but it for sure would be something more interesting like that.

Little John smiles to himself. Gale has the fleeting thought that the older boy has pretty teeth. "My dad always said 2 is better than 1."

Little Gale scrunches up his eyebrows. Both numbers seem lame to him. "Why is it better?"

"1 is lonely." The 8-year-old replies, smile fading as he twirls a blade of

grass that he'd plucked from the ground in his hands. "You can't play catch with just 1, you know?"

While Gale was too young to fully understand death or grief, he still had somewhat of a grasp back then that John's dad was gone for good. Gale use to walk his puppy past John and his dad playing baseball in the field nearly every day, but then one day it was just John by himself with an extra baseball mitt. The older boy had been crying and Gale had stopped to ask him why. John had told him he didn't have someone to play ball with anymore.

Little Gale had already figured out he didn't like sports, which had isolated him from a lot of boys his age, but he also didn't like to see the boy he walked past every Sunday sad. Gale missed seeing the older boy's grinning face on his walks. It had become something he looked forward to. He wanted him to stop frowning, so Gale had hesitantly told him that he'd play with him. Much to his delight, the smile had briefly returned, though it wasn't as bright as it had been before.

Little Gale thinks of how John had been 1 without his dad, and how he himself had been 1 since he didn't have any friends besides Marge who was, well, a girl. Being 1 had been quite lonely. Now though... together, John and Gale made 2, didn't they?

Maybe 2 wasn't so bad, after all. Gale wasn't lonely anymore.

He reaches with his small hand across the lawn for John's own and folds them together. He can tell the older boy was getting sad about his dad again after having mentioned him. He doesn't want that.

"I think my favorite number is 2, too."

John looks over and flashes the younger child his toothy smile. "Too-too?

Are you a train?"

Gale uses his hand that isn't holding John's to playfully start to hit the older boy who's making fun of him. The brunet laughs and shields his face with his free arm, keeping their hands clasped together.

That had been the first time Gale Cleven had ever felt 'butterflies,' but he hadn't known that yet.

The memory fades and it feels like the brightness of the white lights shining down on the field have been turned way up. The volume of the crowd around them seems ten times louder than it had been before. Gale can't breathe. He can't stop thinking about John Egan.

Though had he ever truly stopped thinking about John Egan after that day?

Gale had been glad John never spoke to him again once he came back to Wyoming. Little John Egan had made him feel things on that playground that Gale had come to realize he couldn't feel once his parents had told Gale what he wanted and who he would be. But even though he'd tried his hardest to bury what he'd felt, it had lingered. It had festered inside him like a terrible infection. Still, he'd managed to keep it at bay.

At least, he'd been able to until he'd run into John Egan at detention.

He thinks of how John Egan had always been a lot of things, but most of all, he'd always been himself. To Gale, that was always an impossible concept. In the years they hadn't spoken, he had almost grown to hate John for how he did it with such ease. It's true what they say, though: there's a thin line between love and hate. Gale still hadn't been able to stop himself from defending John even when the

other boy wasn't around, which had landed him in detention. Not to mention how he *stupidly* hadn't been able to let John leave detention and go on his reckless adventure alone.

At some point Gale had placed his helmet on his head and crouched down to where he was supposed to be out of habit. Rosie had gotten into his own position in front of him, as well. He needs to be paying attention, but all he can think is that... while it had been stupid, it had been the most free Gale had felt in a long, long time.

Is he... is he really going to live the rest of his life miserable trying to make his parents happy, and never feel the way he's felt with John these last few days again? Would they really want him to do that to himself? And even if they do... is that right of them to, like Gale had told himself it was all these years? Is that love?

Gale finds himself searching the bleachers once again. This time, he finds the pair of familiar brown eyes. John stops mid-conversation with Curt who sits next to him to stare back at Gale. He can't read his face from here, but Gale hears his voice in his head.

'I know that someone who loves you would never ask you to put yourself at risk like this.'

The ref blows the whistle. It echoes in the background of what John had urged him to understand earlier.

'You don't have to do anything, Gale. That's one of the best things about this life. I hope you eventually realize that.'

"Hike!"

"Wait!"

Rosie had been just about to snap the ball to him, but had frozen mid-motion following his abrupt shout. Gale freezes, too. The demand had come out before he'd been able to think twice and stop it.

"The fuck does he mean wait?" One of Chick's close friends on their team blurts, aggravated. Members of the other team and the students in the crowd begin to mutter amongst themselves while his own team simply stares at him, clearly taken aback.

Rosie had turned around now, scanning Gale's face in both concern and confusion. "What's going on, buddy?"

Gale opens and closes his mouth a few times before he can make any words come out. It's probably only a few seconds, but with everyone's eyes on him it feels like a millennia.

"I-I can't do this anymore."

He holds his breath, waiting for his friend to ask him what the fuck he's talking about right now. To his shock, a smile slowly spreads across Rosie's face instead. "About time."

Rosie pats his shoulder reassuringly and Gale is suddenly overwhelmed with gratefulness for what a good guy and friend Rosenthal had always been to him. He looks over at Nash and Benny, feeling a pang of sadness as he realizes he'll never be on this field with them again. His love for the game may have not been real, but his love for his teammates had been.

Gale, much to both of their surprise, pulls Rosie into a crushing hug. Gale had never been very affectionate with his friends- he'd always been too afraid to be seen as being too close with them and give people the wrong idea. Now, though, he allows himself to squeeze the other boy tightly. "Thank you."

Rosie shoves at his shoulders, pushing him away playfully while chiding him. "What are you waiting for? Get outta here!"

Gale laughs and nods, blinking tears that had begun to well up in his eyes away. He jogs off field and approaches Chick who is sitting on the bench. The boy looks at Gale like he's lost his mind. Maybe he has. Gale doesn't care, though. He's decided he isn't going to care about a lot of things anymore. He points a finger at the, unfortunately, only other player who had the arm to replace him and pokes him roughly in the chest.

"Don't fuck this up for them." He says threateningly, but there's still a smile on his face. He can't believe he's doing this. Chick evidently can't, either, because he's too busy gaping at him to get mad about Gale jabbing him. Gale finds himself laughing again, feeling nearly delirious now, and goes to turn away. A hand clamps down and jerks on his shoulder, stopping him.

He turns to face his coach, whose face is as red as a tomato. Gale can tell he's furious. He should probably stop smiling now, but he can't.

"The hell are you doing, Cleven!" The older man shouts, spit hitting Gale's face with every word. For some reason this causes laughter to bubble from Gale's mouth again. If it's even possible, he could swear the man's face gets even redder.

"I- I think I quit," he tells his coach breathlessly.

"What- the hell do you mean you think you quit? You're the best player on the team!"

Gale's cheeks are starting to hurt from how wide his grin is. "I never wanted to play on the team at all."

His coach calls after him, but he doesn't turn around. He's never felt more light on his feet than he does now, running off of the green turf for what would hopefully be the very last time.

—

When he gets to the locker room it still feels unreal. All he can do at first is stand lamely with his hands hanging limply at his sides.

"Holy shit," he finally says out loud between heavy breaths. He reaches up and yanks the helmet off of his head, looking down at it in his hands in disbelief. Was he really never going to have to wear this stupid thing again? "Holy *shit."*

The door behind him is suddenly thrown open so quickly it ricochetes off of the wall loudly. Gale, assuming it must be his dad who had chased after him, swallows heavily and squares his shoulders to steel himself for the confrontation. However, when he turns around, it's not his dad that’s standing there. It's John.

"Gale," the brunet exclaims loudly before stumbling to a stop a few feet in front of him. The older boy suddenly looks unsure of himself, like he's not quite sure what to do now that he's here despite bursting

in so unabashedly. It's an unfamiliar look on the usually overly confident boy. Gale can't help but find it cute.

He marvels at how he doesn't immediately try to push that thought away anymore.

"John," he replies, beaming. John Egan is cute. John Egan is downright *adorable.*

The other boy just blinks a few times before replying, brows furrowed at Gale's bright expression. "I just- I wanted to see if you were okay? Why did you- what happened?"

"I've never been better," Gale states enthusiastically, feeling exhilarated again. "I just quit the team."

John's jaw drops. Gale crosses the distance between them in just three strides, grabbing ahold of John by the collar of his denim jacket. John's eyes turn wide as saucers as Gale pulls the older boy towards him roughly, cutting off whatever he'd opened his mouth to say by pressing their lips together.

The impulsive kiss is miscalcuated and clumsy- Gale isn't used to the other person being taller than him. At first, John is stiff as a board and Gale starts to pull away, face heating up out of embarrassment. John stops him by cupping Gale's face in his hands, pulling the younger boy back to him eagerly. Gale feels like he's floating, his heart is soaring up into the sky at the sensation of John's lip moving against his.

"Gale!"

Marge's voice is muffled from behind the door, but Gale recognizes it immediately. The door handle begins to turn, and just like that his heart goes hurdling back towards the ground.

Gale rips their lips apart, spinning them around and shoving John as far away from him and the door as he can. The action causes the brunet to go crashing into a set of lockers. Gale's first instinct is to reach for John, to check if he's alright, but the sound of the door opening causes him to hesitate. Gale ends up turning around in panic instead, leaving John on the floor where he'd collapsed.

Marge rushes in, marching up to him with pom poms still in hand. "What's going on, Gale?!"

Shit. She must have seen John come in after him. She must've heard them. Gale starts to wave his hands in front of him defensively.

"Marge, it's not what it-"

"Did you really just quit?!" She interrupts, tossing her pom poms to the side to start gesturing wildly. "What the hell are you thinking?"

Not understanding why she isn't fazed by the loud noise she had to have heard before she'd entered and John being crumpled against the lockers, Gale turns to look behind him confusedly.

When he looks though, John is no longer there.

"Where did-" Gale catches himself. He tries to quickly scanning the area for any sign of the other boy. There's no way he'd have been able to completely exit the room without either of them noticing.

Marge's hands are suddenly on him, urging him to face her. "This is your future, Gale. You've worked too hard to quit now. There's too much on the line! College-"

"I didn't even want to play these last three years, Marge," Gale snaps, grinding his teeth at her words. "Do you really think I'd want to play four more?"

The coldness of his tone surprises them both. He'd never spoken to Marge in such a way. She retracts her hands from him like he'd burned her.

"Marge, wait, I'm sorry-"

"W-why did you never mentioned anything before?" Marge asks, eyes wide and starting to brim with confused tears. Gale's heart begins to ache.

He may have never been *in* love with Marge, but he did love her. The fact that he had made her cry makes him feel ashamed.

"I-" Gale drops his head, unable to look at what he's sure will be disappointment on her face. "I knew how much you loved us both bein' captains on the field together."

Small, dainty hands reach up to cradle his cheeks. Gale can't help but think about how different they feel from the rough, calloused ones that had done the same motion just moments before. The comparison makes his insides twist into a knot.

"I love you more," Marge tells him gently. The unexpected reply causes him to snap his eyes back up to meet hers. "I want you to be happy more than anything."

Marge pulls him into an embrace. Gale wishes the ground would open up and swallow him whole. Her understanding feels so much worse than he'd thought her disappointment would. After what he'd just done, he absolutely doesn't deserve it.

Marge tucks her head in the crook of Gale's neck. "You can tell me anything, Gale. I don't want you to feel like you have to keep things from me. We're supposed to be partners."

Her breath tickles his skin with every word. He shivers at the sensation, coldness seeping into his bones. She pulls back slightly to look up at him with painfully earnest eyes.

"No more secrets, okay?"

Gale studies the face of the girl he'd been with for years now; the girl he'd planned an entire future with. He was ready to uproot his whole life and turn it upside down in just a day, but could he do the same to hers right now? What could he even say at the moment?

'Hey, by the way, not only do I not like football, I also don't like girls! Everything you know about me is basically a lie!'

No, he couldn't say that. Not right now, at least. Not when she was staring at him with so much trust and devotion.

"No more secrets," he replies, doing his best to force a smile.

Marge grins back at him and surges up to kiss him. Gale lets her. He feels like he might throw up as her lips work against his. They kiss until the sound of the door slamming shut causes them both to jump apart.

"What was that?" Marge asks, hand curled worriedly around his forearm.

"Nothin’," Gale tells her, swallowing the bile in his throat. "The wind, probably. The door must have not shut all the way when you came in."

"Oh," Marge chirps, wrapping her arms around his waist once again. "That makes sense."

Gale doesn't reply. He stares over her shoulder hollowly at the door that John had just left through.

—

Chapter End Notes

not proof read in the slightest fuck it we ball or this chapter will never get posted by my perfectionist ass. marge gets some redemption. gale is an idiot. so am i for taking a literal year to finish this story

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Youse didn't miss much at the after party last night, if you were wondering. The star player abruptly quitin' the team kinda put a damper on the entire night," Curt informs him from where he's leaned up against the lockers next to his.

John simply hums in reply. He'd been uncharacteristically quiet all day, *especially* at mentions of a certain blond boy, which of course hadn't gone unnoticed by his best friend. He can feel Curt's inquisitive stare as he rifles through his disorganized locker for his English textbook on auto-pilot. He freezes once his fingers find it, realizing who he'll be unable to continue purposefully avoiding seeing if he goes to his next class. John slowly puts the book back and shuts his locker. He turns to Curt and does his best to muster up one of his usual smirks.

"You want to have our smoke sesh early today?"

Curt's eyes sweep over his forced expression. "Youse aren't going to your English class? Are you avoiding Cleven?"

John's indifferent facade falters at Curt's spot-on assessment but he tries his best to quickly recover.

"No," he lies with what he knows is a much less-convincing smirk than before. He hesitates before continuing, trying to really sell it so his

friend stops pushing. "Why would I be avoiding him? I have a bet to win, don't I?"

Curt narrows his eyes. "What happened after youse two disappeared last night, Bucky? Did Cleven defile you in the locker room?"

John feels his face heat up which causes Curt's eyebrows to shoot up, as John is *not* someone who blushes at such topics usually.

"Oh my god, *did he?* I was *joking!* Cleven, that dirty dog! Dude went balls tuh the wall last night! I didn't know he had it in him! Fuck, I owe youse fifty bu—" John clamps a hand over Curt's mouth to stop the flow of shocked words and seizes him by the shoulder.

"Shut *up!"* John hisses, frantically looking around the crowded hallway to see if anyone had overheard his *very loud*friend. "No one was defiled! Nothing happened!"

Curt wrestles John's hand away from his face with a cheeky grin. "Oh really? Is that why youse is blushing like a virgin maiden right now?"

"I'm—I'm not *blushing—"*

Curt isn't listening, as something had caught his attention over John's shoulder. His eyes, if possible, begin to dance with even more mischief at what, or *who,* he must see coming towards them. *Oh no.*

"Guess I'll just have tuh ask Gale myself, seeing as he's coming this—where are youse going? Wait, I do want to smoke now though!"

John barely catches the tail end of what his best friend shouts after him as he'd already shoved him away and rounded the corner the second he'd heard the name of their student body president. He'll just meet Curt at the damn bleachers, because he is *not* at all ready to face Gale Cleven.

He still hasn't decided what he feels about last night, or how the fuck he's supposed to proceed. Does he yell at Gale when he sees him again? Call him a cheating asshole who needs to make up his mind? Does he kiss him again?

John slows down to a jog as he approaches his and Curt's smoking spot, smacking himself on the cheek at how *dumb* that last thought was. Of *course* he doesn't kiss him again, he has a whole ass girlfriend!

But... oh, *god,* does he want to.

The feeling of Gale's lips against his is all he's been thinking about since, if John is being honest. He's barely even had time to be upset about the rest of the situation—it's occupying his thoughts *that much*. He falls to the ground with a groan, covering his face with his hands. He lays down in the gravel, uncaring for how it dirties his leather jacket that he typically cherishes as he waits for Curt to catch up to him.

"Wow," Curt replies after John finally caves and tells him everything. The burnt out blunt dangles from his fingers, having been long

forgotten about as he blinks at John with wide eyes. "He—he kissed her *right after* youse?"

"Yep," John says with an emphasis on the sound the *'p'* makes.

There's a beat of silence as Curt continues to digest this. He suddenly stands to his feet so swiftly it startles John.

"I'm gonna beat the living crap outta him."

"What? No." John also shoots up to grab him by his jacket and stop him from getting any further. "Curt, we literally made a *bet* on if we could get him to cheat on his girlfriend with me. You can't beat him up for doing it."

"He coulda broke up with her first!" Curt says indignantly, clearly pissed. "He didn't *have* tuh cheat! Or he coulda at least not *kissed her* right after you while youse is in the *same damn room!*"

John doesn't have a reply because, well, Curt's technically very right. Still, John doesn't loosen his hold on Curt's sleeve. He's not going to let him beat Gale up—he's sure the blond is doing that himself plenty already.

"Besides, that was before—" Curt pauses mid-sentence. The shorter boy studies John's face for a moment before seeming to come to a decision and sighs, visibly deflating. "Fine, whatevah you say. It was just a stupid bet anyways, right?"

John lets go of Curt's shirt and looks away. He doesn't reply again, and Curt clears his throat. He rummages through his pockets and pulls out

a handful of bills.

"Fuck that guy," his best friend insists as he waves the money at him. "At least youse is fifty dollars richer!"

John doesn't move to take the cash. His gaze doesn't waver from the ground as he clenches and unclenches his fists to try to unwind the tension that is taught throughout his entire body. He wets his lips with the tip of his tongue, mouth dry from apprehensiveness for what he is going to say next.

"I—I like him, Curt. I *really* like him."

John sees Curt wince at his quiet admission from the edge of his vision. He slowly lowers his extended hand. "Yeah, I know, Bucky."

John looks up now, surprised. "You do?"

Curt laughs. "Well, considering that I'm not fucking blind and have unfortunately been witness tuh you making googly eyes literally every time youse seen him for the past week, yeah, I know."

"I don't—I don't make googly eyes at him."

"You do. It's bad."

John slowly lowers himself back on the ground, processesing this new and embarassing information. Curt plops down next to him with another sigh and starts to attempt to relight their joint. He takes two

puffs before passing it to an eager John.

"So now what? Yuh think he'll break up with her?"

John takes a long drag and kicks at the dirt with his heels a bit before answering. "I don't know. I mean, he might not even actually like me back."

Curt is quiet for a moment. John looks up from the indent he'd now made in the ground with his shoes to see the other boy blinking owlishly again. "Why the fuck else would he kiss you?"

John shrugs as he passes the joint back to Curt. "Maybe it was just a spur of the moment thing, you know? He'd just quit the team like he'd been wanting to for so long and maybe he—he—"

"Maybe he what?" Curt doesn't take the offered blunt from John's hand, instead staring at him and looking astounded. "Decided he might as well kiss a *boy* for tuh first time in his so-far-completely-straight life, too, just for the heck of it? God, you are so fucked up. This self-loathing thing of yours is getting so old, pal. *Obviously* he likes you back."

It's John's turn to blink back feeling stupefied now. Curt has been reading him to filth all day, but he supposes it's about time someone sat him down and just laid it out straight for him. God knows how long it would take his childhood trauma riddled brain to sort it all out itself.

"Listen, whateva yuh decide to do, just make sure you make him work for it," Curt informs him, sounding haggard and resigned as he finally plucks the blunt from John's fingers and hits it deeply. He coughs up some smoke and waves it away in annoyance before pointing a finger

at John threateningly. "Don't let him off tuh hook for that shit last night just like that because he's easy on the eyes."

John feels a smile pull at his lips at his friend's protective words. *God,* why hadn't he told Curt how he'd been feeling lately sooner? Talking about boy problems with his best friend while they get high was the best decision he'd made lately.

"Oh," Curt adds, putting out the joint in the dirt next to him. "And *definitely* don't ever tell him about the bet."

John laughs, feeling much more relaxed than he had earlier. "No shit, Sherlock."

There's a loud bang on top of the bleachers, but both boys are too busy letting the warmth of the THC wash over them to worry much about it. It's probably just a stray ball from the field where a gym class was playing soccer, anyways.

"...So this means I can keep this fifty, right? It would probably be wrong of you to take it—"

He keeps avoiding Gale. He's currently on day three.

It's gotten to the point where it's become a bit silly, or at least that's something along the lines of what Curt had not so gently just informed him of a moment ago as he cowers behind him.

"Youse is a 6 foot fucking 2 giant hiding behind a 5'10" Irish man, Bucky, you really think he doesn't see you?"

"You're, like, 5'8" on a good day, Curt, let's be real," John quips from his crouched down position behind him, unable to help himself from taking the easy jab.

"Alright, that's it," Curt snaps, spinning around and quickly seizing John by his shoulders before he can do anything. Having taken his bigger friend by surprise, Curt is able to easily turn them around and very unceremoniously shove John forward into a hard surface.

A hard surface with *abs* and strong arms that wrap around him to catch him.

John slowly opens his eyes that he'd shut upon bracing for impact with the floor to see two wide blue eyes peering down at him. John wonders if this had been Curt's plan. He tilts his head slightly to the side and the way Curt's jaw is nearly touching the floor says otherwise.

He turns his attention back to the person who hasn't looked away from John once yet, nor has made any move to straighten them out so that John isn't cradled in their arms like a damsel in distress. They stare at each other in silence like that, neither of them speaking, for what he doubts is even a minute but feels like several.

Gale is the first one to come to his senses. He breaks their eye contact to look around, realizing the amount of people who are staring at them and letting go of John so quickly that he almost fails to right himself. A bitter taste begins to form in John's mouth as the crowd loses interest in what they probably assume is Gale Cleven simply being the heroic guy he always is to everyone.

"You've—you've been avoidin' me," Gale says hesitantly once he seems to have deemed enough time has passed and the people around them aren't paying attention anymore.

John had suddenly begun to feel *angry* as he'd stood and waited in silence for Gale to finally speak up. Maybe he should have been angry this whole time.

"Okay," John replies, keeping his tone purposefully flat. "I'm avoiding you. So what? What should I have been doing instead after the other night?"

He isn't been being very loud or specific about anything, but John can tell what he's saying is making Gale more on edge as the blond fidgets with his backpack strap and nervously looks side to side.

"Can we, uh, can we go talk somewhere private, John?" Gale asks with a slightly shaky voice and an imploring, earnest gaze that tugs at John heart strings and chips away at the growing anger in his chest.

'Don't you make it easy on him,' Curt tuts at him from the back of his brain. It's so clear that John wonders for a minute if Curt suddenly developed fucking telepathic powers and forced the thought into his brain from where he's still standing somewhere behind John.

"Maybe later," John tries to say with as much indifference as he can

muster when Gale is looking at him like that. He then does the absolute opposite of what a large part of him wants to do at the moment, and he starts to walk away.

"Wait, John, please, can—can we just—"

He hears Gale make a noise of frustration behind him and suddenly he's being abruptly grabbed ahold of by the shoulders for the second time today. He's pulled backwards and around a corner, nearly tripping over his feet as he's dragged into an empty classroom. Curt simply watches the entire kidnapping play out despite John looking at him for help.

John can't decide if he's an absolutely terrible or absolutely great friend for it.

Chapter End Notes

i'll go back and add the lyrics/song title and format i usually do for this fic later, just was too excited to post to since it's been, you know, like a year. A short chapter but wanted y'all to know this is still being worked on. only a few more chapters to go!

Thank you to everyone who didnt give up and kept commenting, means so much to me!❤ if anyone is still here in 2025 please let me know lol

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!